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Building, Guiding, and Sustaining Regional Networks for Psychology Teachers

Attending the annual conference of a national disciplinary society like the [American Psychological Association](#) (APA) or the [National Council for the Social Studies](#) (NCSS) can be a valuable and engaging professional development experience for high school psychology teachers. Similarly, psychology teachers can gain tremendous benefit from attending national teaching conferences such as the [Annual Conference on Teaching \(ACT\)](#) sponsored by the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP) and the [National Institute for the Teaching of Psychology](#) (NITOP) which bring together both high school and college psychology educators. But the travel and registration costs associated with national conferences can make it challenging for teachers to attend regularly. Moreover, opportunities to develop local professional networks at national events may be limited.

In recent years, the APA Committee of Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools (TOPSS), thanks to financial support from the [American Psychological Foundation](#), has made a concerted effort to expand opportunities for teachers around the country to network and share best practices through encouraging the development of regional networks. Regional networks are groups of high school psychology teachers working in a particular area, state, or region who engage in shared professional development and networking opportunities. Depending on the interests and needs of members, activities can range from ongoing peer mentoring meetings to an annual conference with invited speakers. Networks may focus exclusively on high school teachers or include college educators. This document is designed to help psychology teachers develop and sustain regional networks that are accessible and cost-effective, yet still provide quality professional development opportunities for instructors of psychology.

BENEFITS OF REGIONAL NETWORK

- Provide teachers with an opportunity to strengthen their professional identities as psychology teachers.
- Create low-cost professional development opportunities for teachers who may not have district or school-wide professional development geared toward their discipline.
- Give teachers who are often the only individuals teaching a psychology course at their school the opportunity to network with other instructors to share resources and teaching ideas.
- Allow teachers to continue their own professional growth and continue to sustain their enthusiasm for psychology which will benefit their students.
- Provide an opportunity for high school instructors to connect with 2- and 4-year college and university professors.

Regional Networks Starter Kit

A “how to” guide for teachers on starting a regional network

FINDING TEACHERS TO INVITE

- APA has a [membership directory](#) for APA members and affiliates only. You can search this directory for high school teacher affiliates in your state. You can also email topss@apa.org to send a message to the TOPSS listserv.
 - » To search for teachers, type “High school” in the “Search for people box” and location in the “Location box.” Look for people whose membership type is high school teacher.
- Post to the [AP Psychology Teachers Facebook Page](#): A large proportion of high school psychology teachers teach AP Psychology, so posting to this page is a great way to connect to nearly 9,000 teachers of psychology. However, we strongly encourage those planning a regional network to include outreach to the broad community of psychology educators in their area including those teaching on-level, International Baccalaureate, Cambridge AICE, dual enrollment and other types of classes.
- Contact school principals in your state or region: Letters or emails could be sent to school principals asking them to forward information to the psychology teacher at their school.
 - » The National Center for Education Statistics [directory of public schools](#).
 - » The Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) [directory of schools on tribal reservations](#).
- You may also want to contact local teacher preparation programs to invite pre-service teachers interested in teaching psychology to your conference.
- Contact the NCSS Psychology Community: The [NCSSPC leadership team](#) can announce your network to NCSSPC members.
- Once you’ve established a list of members, ask them if they know of other teachers who may want to join the network.

FINDING COLLEGE-LEVEL EDUCATORS TO INVITE

Many colleges and universities are open to, and excited about, outreach opportunities to partner with area high schools.

- Contact psychology department chairs at nearby institutions to see if they are interested in hosting a regional network meeting, contributing additional financial support to a regional network, or sending faculty to present at a meeting or conference.
- You can also search the APA [membership directory](#) for local psychologists. If you are a member of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP; APA Division 2), you can also access their membership directory through their [“member benefits” webpage](#). STP members include high school teachers and undergraduate psychology faculty members committed to teaching.

CREATING YOUR COMMUNITY

Once you have a roster of regional network members, we recommend creating a shareable contact list (be sure to get permission from members to share their contact information with other members). Creating an email group is also a helpful way to maintain contact with members. Depending on the preferences of your members, that can be a private group that you use to share announcements or a public group that all members are invited to use. Some regional networks create an online platform (e.g., Facebook group, webpage, Slack community) as another way of giving members the ability to keep in contact between meetings.

When choosing a name for their network, some groups (e.g., CHITOPSS, MNTOPSS) incorporate the name Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools (TOPSS). The American Psychological Association (APA) requires that you [agree to the guidelines linked here](#) in order to use the TOPSS name.

Planning Events or Activities

Although many established regional networks offer their members annual conferences or workshops, that idea may be daunting as a first step. Moreover, in the initial stages, teachers starting a regional network may not know enough

about the unique experience and needs of local teachers to plan a tailored conference that will have impact. Some sample activities you can consider for your regional network include:

- Informal group meetings aimed at encouraging teachers to connect, discuss their challenges and needs, and share ideas and resources.
- Book circles that meet regularly to discuss relevant books or other reading materials (e.g., [Transforming Introductory Psychology](#), [Motivation Myth Busters](#), [Study like a Champ](#), the [National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula](#), or the [APA Monitor](#))
- Activity-focused meetings (e.g., using the [Resource Vetting Rubric](#) to reflect on your assignments, applying the [Diversity Self-Reflection Tool](#), reading research articles, integrating [metacognitive, transferable, and well-being skills into your teaching](#)).
- Conferences or workshops (see more below)

Regional networks often host in person gatherings. However, if you live in a rural area or have members with significant caretaking responsibilities and/or transportation challenges, in-person meetings may be difficult to coordinate. Zoom, social media, and other virtual platforms can be used to increase accessibility and connect teachers who are not able to meet in person.

Conference or Workshop Planning Tips

If you opt to plan a conference for your regional network, we strongly recommend that you create a leadership team to help with the planning and execution. It can be very challenging to create a conference if only one person takes on every element of the planning. A partner, committee, or leadership team will greatly alleviate the burden and help with organizing logistics. Dividing up responsibilities will help make an annual conference more sustainable.

Goals, Objectives, and Your Agenda

The first step to planning a conference is identifying your overarching goal and objectives. A starting point is to consider the needs of your members. Are the teachers in your area interested in learning more about an emerging area of psychology (e.g., climate psychology)? Is there a content area that people find difficult to teach? Are members looking for new teaching methods or activities to help cultivate particular skills or deepen learning?

During the initial planning stage, it is also important to consider the professional characteristics of your members.

Is there considerable variability in years of experience? What proportion are teaching on-level versus college-level (e.g., AP)? If you are aiming to recruit teachers with a broad range of professional characteristics, it's important to consider how you will design the workshop so that all teachers will benefit.

Identifying goals and understanding the unique needs of participants will help you to select presenters (e.g., psychologists with a particular content area expertise, highly skilled teachers with a broad repertoire of instructional methods) and design your agenda. Although the types of sessions you choose will depend on your goals, it is often helpful to have a mix of speakers/presentations, demonstrations, and hands-on activities. In our experience, teachers also highly value scheduled opportunities to informally socialize with other attendees and build their professional networks.

Location and Timeline

When finding a location to host your workshop or conference, consider factors such as parking, ease of transportation, security issues if you are hosting at a school, dining space, technology equipment, hotel suggestions, and other logistical issues that may correspond with hosting a few or many instructors. Consider surveying potential attendees to determine if the conference should take place on a weekday, weekend or in the evening. A general timeline you may find helpful is listed below:

- Six months or more prior to event: Select your speakers and date and begin creating a schedule of activities
- Four months or more prior to event: Send a Save the Date and create a firm deadline for registration submission
- Two months prior to event: Send the invitations
- Two weeks prior to event: Registration is due; prepare materials for participants

Securing Speakers and Sending Invitations

Write a formal invitation to invite keynote speaker(s) to present at your conference. Describe the nature of the audience, goals of the conference, the time allotted to the presentation and specifically identify what you are asking the speaker to accomplish. To ensure that the content and activities presented by speakers are of a high quality, ask to preview the content a few weeks in advance of the conference.

Sample Speaker Invitation Letters

Create an invitation for the conference that describes the objectives, format of the day and a call for participant volunteers to present best lessons, projects and/or assessments.

Sample Invitation and Registration Forms

After the Registration Deadline Has Closed

Some important planning activities include:

- Recruiting volunteers (students, teachers) to help with registration, copying, organizing folders and any other issues that might come up during the conference.
- Printing name tags and agendas for all attendees.
- Ordering food/catering, if you are planning to provide food.
- Creating signs to help participants navigate to the area in which the conference will be held, the dining area, restrooms, etc.
- Checking-in with any presenters to confirm their equipment needs, provide an update on the number of registered participants, and get electronic copies of the materials they are willing to share with participants. If presenters need participants to have printed copies of materials (e.g., for an activity), clarify whether they will bring a sufficient number of paper copies to share with participants or if you need to make copies.
- Creating a shared space (e.g., Google Drive, Dropbox) in which presenters can share materials and presentations electronically.
- Confirming with the individuals at the host site that things are taken care of, such as parking, catering, room set-up, security, and technology needs.
- Arranging for promotional materials, if desired. Promotional materials can be ordered for all participants or used as door prizes. They may include textbooks, other psychology books, or branded materials (e.g., stickers, pens, t-shirts).
- Creating an evaluation form that allows you to assess whether you've met your goals and to receive important feedback from participants.

Evaluation Forms

Evaluation forms are an important way to assess whether your conference goals were met and determine if you are

meeting the needs of the members of your regional network. Below are a few tips to keep in mind when developing evaluations:

- Keep them short, focused, and easy to complete.
- Allow participants sufficient time to complete the evaluations on site.
- In order to invite honest feedback, make the evaluation anonymous by default, but allow attendees to provide their identifying information if they want to.
- Include items that assess the extent to which you met your goals. For example, ask participants to rate their understanding of a concept, their confidence in using a particular instructional method or activity, the likelihood that they will change their teaching in response to what they learned. Assessing knowledge and confidence using certain methods both before and after the conference can provide an even stronger indicator of what participants learned.
- Also consider including some items that assess satisfaction with the program, content, and environment.
- Finally, allow participants to write in comments in case there are important factors you left off the evaluation form.

Sample Evaluation Forms

Follow-Up after the Conference

- Be sure to thoroughly reflect on how the conference went and how it could be improved next year. The evaluation form completed by participants will be valuable in making these decisions.
- Write thank you notes/e-mails to anyone who helped with the conference (e.g., speakers, volunteers, anyone who donated goods or services).
- If you receive grant funding, you may need to provide some type of final report.
- If you plan to offer the conference on a regular basis, consider rotating locations for variety and to attract new attendees. Rotating the venue will also make it more equitable for the distance attendees have to travel each year.

Budgetary Considerations

The cost of holding a regional network event varies considerably across networks and depends on the type of activities or events you are planning. Costs may include the following:

- Printing and copying of nametags, flyers, agendas and activities
- Postage if you mail invitations
- Refreshments/catering
- An honorarium, if you include speakers
- Event space, potential including insurance or custodial fees (check with venue)
- Promotional materials (e.g., door prizes or giveaways)

There are several potential funding options to help defray costs associated with regional teaching networks:

- The American Psychological Foundation (APF) offers [High School Psychology Outreach Grants](#), which specifically support regional teaching networks.
- The Society for the Teaching of Psychology (APA Division 2) offers [a program of small grants](#) to promote communication and collaboration between psychology teachers. Specifically, this program is intended to bring together individuals to engage in planned activities targeted at promoting the teaching of psychology or who desire to work together to think about the ways in which the teaching of psychology can be improved.
- Publishers of high school psychology textbooks such as [Worth Publishers](#), [Cengage](#), [McGraw Hill](#), or [W.W. Norton and Company](#) may be willing to donate books, send a representative to the event, or even provide funding for snacks or meals. It will be necessary to find your local or regional sales representative in order to request materials and assistance.

MODEL FORMATS FOR HOSTING A REGIONAL CONFERENCE

[Chicago area Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools \(CHITOPSS\)](#)

This conference features presentations of lessons, activities, and demonstrations from volunteer teacher participants. The conference rotates between schools each year and the date is determined by the host institution.

AGENDA

[Minnesota Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools \(MNTOPSS\)](#)

This regional network partners with a university that hosts and has faculty-led sessions based on their area of specialization. Teachers spend most of the day rotating through sessions and have the opportunity to see the university's research facilities.

AGENDA

[Utah Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools \(UTOPSS\)](#)

UTOPSS collaborates with Westminster University to improve the teaching of psychological science at the high school level by hosting an annual UTOPSS fall conference for teachers.

AGENDA

Other Models

Not all regional networks, especially new networks, are able to start by holding an annual conference. As mentioned in this guide, other virtual or more informal models are possible. For example, as of early 2025, a newer North Dakota TOPSS network has started as a smaller group of twenty teachers. The coordinator sends a digital newsletter to keep members updated with resources and events from TOPSS. The newsletter also highlights teaching tips and resources.

CONTACTS

The following people are available to contact if there are questions or assistance is needed to set up a new conference or network.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

American Psychological Association.
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[https://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/
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