

THE LEARNING System

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF DISTRICT LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

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A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

*Network gives superintendents
a safe space to learn and grow*

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

Bob Villanova and Doris Kurtz manage very different districts in Connecticut. He's superintendent of the affluent, high-achieving Farmington School District. She leads the New Britain School District, where both financial support and achievement are low.

But both Villanova and Kurtz find inspiration and learning through the Connecticut Superintendents Network, a group of superintendents committed to sustained instructional improvement in their districts.

"I do a lot to keep on growing but this network has been the strongest influence on my evolution as a district leader. When I'm with the network, I can be more vulnerable and more open to learning," said Villanova, who is 2008 Connecticut Superintendent of the Year.



Kurtz, who calls herself "a learning junkie," said the network is "truly a salvation."

"This is not like other meetings I go to where people talk about the negative of the month. Nobody's whining about resources. They're thinking about and talking about instruction. I get to bring my intellect to the table. I get enriched and stimulated by those conversations," she said.

The Connecticut Center for School Change launched the network in 2001 by inviting Harvard University education professor Richard Elmore to join eight superintendents for a study group on teaching and learning. For the first several months, Elmore led the group in discussions about core instructional concepts. But Elmore and the Center soon wanted to connect their

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Network gives superintendents a fresh perspective

Norms of the Connecticut Superintendents Network

Attendance

Everyone attends every meeting.

Involvement

Everyone puts work out for discussion and engages in the discipline of practice.

Respect for confidentiality

We agree to respect an individual's wishes not to discuss sensitive matters beyond the group.

Candor and humility

We are willing to be candid about our best judgment and knowledge applied to the problems presented. We are also willing to acknowledge what we don't know.

Attentiveness

Every member invests in listening.

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abstract conversations with real practice. With that, the superintendents began making site visits to each other's districts following what Elmore describes as a "medical rounds model."

The network has now grown to include 25 superintendents in two cohorts. Each cohort meets once a month throughout the year, including a joint meeting in September and a visit to Harvard in the spring. But the bulk of their work is focused on site visits to network districts. Typically, the network visits four districts each year.

The network provides a safe space for superintendents to grapple with difficult topics along with trusted colleagues who share their status, understand the work, and are not afraid to push back and challenge their thinking. "My staff is not as willing to unpack my thinking and certainly not as openly as the other superintendents in the network. We're shoulder to shoulder with each other," Villanova said.

Unlike many states that have meetings among "like districts," the Connecticut network embraces superintendents from all types of districts. "The only requirement is that you want to focus on improving teaching and learning," Villanova said.

The learning has been so powerful that several of the superintendents have created a similar process in their own districts, enabling central office administrators and principals to do site visits to schools within their own district.

BACKGROUND WORK

Every superintendent in the network develops a theory of action that guides their work in their districts and those theories of action also undergird their observations in other districts, said Steve Wlodarczyk, education program officer at the Center who works with the network.

A theory of action is a brief statement — generally an "if, then" statement — that expresses the superintendent's belief about how his or her practice leads to changes in student learning. For example: "If I enable principals from all of our schools to participate in classroom observations together, then principals will

develop a common vision for quality instruction. If principals develop a common vision of quality instruction, then principals will be more able to assist teachers to achieve quality instruction."

In addition, before each cohort began making site visits, the superintendents learned how to use protocols to guide their observations and the discussions that follow. (See Pages 4-5 for an example of an observation protocol.)

PREPARING FOR THE VISIT

The superintendent whose district is being visited identifies the school or schools that will be visited and the problem of practice. The superintendent provides background material — his or her theory of action, school profile, standardized test scores, and school improvement initiatives — to help set the context for the visit.

Visitors know that they will be looking at only a slice of instruction. For example, a visit might focus on the rigor of the lessons and the quality of questions posed by the teacher. At another school, the superintendents might be looking specifically at student engagement with the lesson.

THE VISIT

On the morning of the visit, the principal welcomes the visitors and provides a short introduction to the school. The Center staff reminds the visitors about the focus of the observations.

Organized into teams of four, the superintendents spread out to visit different classrooms or teacher team meetings (typically grade-level or subject-area meetings). Teams normally visit four classrooms with some overlap so all classrooms are visited by at least half the group. The teams observe each classroom or a teacher team meeting for about 20 minutes. "We try to be as unobtrusive as possible. Generally, teachers don't seem rattled or like they're doing special shows. They're more or less doing regular instruction," Villanova said.

Each visit lasts about three hours. The superintendents break for lunch and begin their debriefing.

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The host principal and superintendent both sit in on the 30- to 45-minute debriefing and are encouraged to listen without commenting. Superintendents begin by simply describing what they observed, without making any judgments. Superintendents who visited the same classroom share all of their observations before moving on to the next classroom.

“We’re encouraged to use observant language and not evaluative language. It’s more like ‘we saw this, we didn’t see that,’” Villanova said. For example: “In the 4th-grade classroom, five students were reading the text and making notes in their notebooks. Four other students sitting along the outside row were looking out the window. One student had turned his chair around completely and was not watching the teacher.”

A Center staff member scribes the observations and the superintendents are encouraged to look for patterns, again without injecting judgments.

Kurtz said she learns more from visiting other districts than from visits to her district. “When you look in on a district from the outside, you get a clarity that you can’t get when you’re looking at your own district. You don’t know the history, the people so you’re just observing without any of your subjectivity,” she said.

REFLECTIVE MEETING

At the next monthly meeting, the visited superintendent is the focus of the discussion. The reflective session is an opportunity for the superintendents to explore how what was observed relates to the superintendent’s theory of action for systemic improvement.

“Elmore probes more because the principal is not there so there’s less worry about defending the school. That opens up the conversation,” Villanova said.

Even at that, however, the superintendents say the tone of reflection is always positive. “No matter where we’ve been, the attitude is that we’re going to build from where we are,” Villanova said.

REVISIT

Three months after the initial visit, two of the respective cohort superintendents, the visited superintendent, and Wlodarczyk return for a second visit. They follow roughly the same procedure as in the initial visit, although the intention of the revisit is to determine if the school has been responsive to the initial observations of the superintendents.

The revisit was introduced this year as a way to insert some accountability into the process. Just as there is a reflection process after the initial visitation, there is a 30-minute report out of the revisit at a subsequent meeting following a protocol developed by the network members.

LEADERS LEARNING

Developing an atmosphere of trust is essential if the superintendents are going to feel free to share their observations and comfortable hearing the observations of others. To promote this, the network abides by a set of norms (see sidebar). A crucial norm is the expectation that what is said in the room stays in the room.

“When you have that trust, you can go even deeper because you trust that what you’re saying is not going to become public fodder,” Kurtz said.

And, sometimes, what the superintendents say to each other in this private space can be brutally honest. Villanova recalls a site visit to a school in his district that was widely applauded as being an outstanding school. “Instead, they were fairly critical. They told me they saw a lot of boring, stand-and-deliver teaching. And they were right on with what they said. I would not get that kind of commentary from people in this district,” he said.

But how the superintendents use what they learn is largely up to them. “I have to internalize everything and digest it before I can see what I can do with it in my district. You can’t just put it in place because it’s ‘good work.’ You have to think about the context and the culture,” Kurtz said.

“Nobody’s holding your hand here to say ‘here’s how you translate this into your district.’ That’s all up to you. You have to do that for yourself,” Villanova said. ■

Norms of the Connecticut Superintendents Network

Mutual responsibility

We agree that we will use and abide by protocols and practices adopted by the Network.

Sharing

Materials produced specifically for the members of the Network may be shared outside of the Network with the permission of the author.

Source: Connecticut Superintendents Network.

► To learn more about the Connecticut Superintendents Network, visit www.ctschoolchange.org/

► Read more about Richard Elmore’s ideas on large-scale school improvement in an interview in the spring 2008 issue of *JSD*.