



CORE PRACTICES FUEL SUPERINTENDENTS' EQUITY FOCUS

By Scott Thompson

For eight years, more than a dozen district superintendents in New Jersey have joined together for a full day each month during the school year to listen to and learn from each other as a community of practice.

Known as the New Jersey Network of Superintendents, this community of practice has a tight focus on advancing equity through improvement of practice in the instructional core. The network is a program of the Panasonic Foundation, which partners with public school districts and their communities

to break the links between race, poverty, and educational outcomes by improving the academic and social success of all students.

“The rich discussions and the opportunity to be able to interact with other superintendents is incredibly rewarding,” says network member Olga Hugelmeyer, superintendent of Elizabeth Public Schools. “I find the experience as a whole incredibly valuable. It’s just the best professional development for us. We all recognize that.”

In a survey at the end of the eighth year, all responding superintendents reported feeling:

- Their perspectives are valued by their network colleagues;



EXPECTATIONS OFFERED BY THE DESIGN TEAM

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM US

- A fierce commitment to collegial learning.
- A tight focus on the instructional core and systemic levers for improving practice in that core.
- Facilitative and logistical support.

WHAT WE EXPECT FROM YOU

- A fierce commitment to collegial learning.
- The time and attention that are needed to help this network become a community of practice.
- Candid feedback to your sponsors and facilitators.

- A sense of trust within the network;
- Comfortable sharing conflicting viewpoints; and
- That network colleagues follow through when they say they are going to do something.

Additionally, a majority of superintendents identified engaging in courageous conversations on issues concerning race and their implications for achieving educational equity as among the most valuable activities. They felt that these conversations demonstrated a high level of trust and comfort within the network.

The 13 superintendents who came together for the initiation of the network in December 2008 were a diverse group, representing urban, suburban, and rural communities.

Some network members were long-time veteran superintendents, and others were still testing their wings; three were women and 10 men; three were African-American, two Latino, seven white, and one Asian-American (Thompson, 2011).

That diversity of experiences and perspectives, combined with the development of open, trusting relationships around a shared focus on leading for equity and improvement of the instructional core, were key factors in transforming a professional network into an authentic community of practice. It took time and the following core practices and approaches for the network to develop into a vibrant community:

- A design team that models community values and priorities;
- Developing and internalizing norms;
- Using protocols and practices;
- Capturing learning through documentation and learning journals;
- Transferring agency to members;
- Balancing stability with flexibility to innovate and evolve; and
- Members acting on what is learned back in their districts.

A DESIGN TEAM THAT MODELS COMMUNITY VALUES AND PRIORITIES

During the year leading up to the launch of the network, Panasonic Foundation Executive Director Larry Leverett, senior consultant Gail Davis, and I investigated existing networks, spoke with practicing superintendents, and organized a program design team to begin planning for the launch of this new initiative.

This team included past superintendents, university-based researchers, and facilitators who had extensive experience with protocols for group learning. We realized early on that if the design team was to play an effective role in nurturing and supporting a community of practice involving working superintendents, the design team itself needed to become a community of practice.

Leading up to the launch, we used several daylong face-to-face planning meetings to get better acquainted and develop a set of group norms — not for the yet-to-be-launched network, but for ourselves as a design team, including “explore diversity and conflicting perspectives” and “revisit your premises and challenge assumptions.”

In addition to designing the program as a whole and planning each monthly, daylong session, the design team facilitated the sessions. In the opening segment of the first session, the design team offered the expectations outlined on p. 33.

Early on, network members developed personal theories of action for improving instructional practice and student outcomes in their districts. A theory of action makes explicit a set of strategies that in theory should result in achieving the organization’s agreed-upon outcomes. In iterative cycles, superintendents received feedback from design team members and from fellow network members on their theories of action.

Within a month or so of working on superintendents’ theories of action, the design team realized that we needed to share our nascent theory of action about the goals and purposes of the network with network members and seek their feedback. This kind of modeling was an important contributor to building community among superintendents and design team members.

DEVELOPING AND INTERNALIZING NORMS

From day one, the network began building relationships among and between participating superintendents and design team members and drafting a set of group norms. This was essential groundwork for the formation of a community of practice.

The design team’s group norms became a point of reference for network members as they began developing their own norms. The norms were refined over the first few months and added to from time to time over the years.

The value of norms is not so much the words on paper, but the values and shared commitment to each other as fellow members of a community that the words represent. Over time,

the words on paper have been referred to less and less as the community has matured, but this is not because the norms have become irrelevant; rather, they have been internalized and are being lived out more than referenced.

USING PROTOCOLS AND PRACTICES

One thing that members value about the network is the quality of conversation. A key contributor to that quality is the use of protocols or structured processes in those conversations. Conversations that might otherwise veer off course instead remain focused and delve deeper into the topic than would otherwise be the case.

Throughout its history, network members have shared work in small groups with colleagues from other districts. In a typical small-group work session, superintendents take turns presenting their work. After the presentation, others in the small group ask clarifying questions. Next, participants ask probing questions, which the presenting superintendent may choose to respond to — or not.

All of that takes place in about 25 minutes, followed by a 10-minute dialogue among all small-group participants on observations, questions, and reflections about what has surfaced up to that point. In the final five minutes, the presenting superintendent offers final reflections. Then the protocol begins again with another superintendent until each superintendent in the small group has presented work and received feedback from network colleagues.

CAPTURING LEARNING THROUGH DOCUMENTATION AND LEARNING JOURNALS

Regular documentation and reflection are central to the network’s development. From the outset, the design team has included documenters whose goals were to report on the superintendents’ experiences and learning and foster reflection on the network’s theory of action.

To accomplish those purposes, the documenters produce a meeting summary following each session, conduct an annual survey of network members and design team members, and engage in annual one-on-one interviews with network members. All of these sources of evidence feed into an annual documentation report.

Additionally, network members respond in writing to these learning journal prompts at the end of each session:

- What are your insights?
- What remains unclear?
- How can we increase learning in future meetings?

These activities promote a regular process of program design-practice-documentation-reflection that fuels an ongoing cycle of learning and supports the network’s evolution as a community of practice. While busy superintendents would find it difficult to carry out the design and documentation functions on their own, the documentation reports and learning journals

infuse this cycle with the superintendents' voices.

In fact, every design team meeting begins with reflections on the previous month's learning journals and the monthly documentation report. In addition, the design team's annual planning retreat also begins with consideration of the documentation team's annual report and the results of the annual interviews and superintendent survey. This reflective and iterative component of program design is another contributor to the design team being its own community of practice supporting the larger community of practice.

TRANSFERRING AGENCY TO MEMBERS

From the outset, a network goal was to transfer agency for learning from the design team to the superintendent members. A community of practice is far from reaching its potential if the members of that community have not assumed ownership of their individual and collective learning.

We have pursued this goal in a number of ways. Following each year of the network, several superintendent members work with the design team in a summer planning retreat to develop a game plan for the forthcoming year. The inclusion of superintendents' voices and perspectives in this process is essential in shaping a program tailored to the needs and priorities of the community.

Superintendent members have also at times assumed the role of presenter or facilitator, roles that are more often played by design team members or guest speakers. Regardless of who plans and facilitates monthly sessions, a key contributor to the formation of a high-quality community of practice has been ensuring that most of the learning that goes on is from within the community — superintendents learning from superintendents. This means that the bulk of the time is spent in small-group and whole-group dialogue.

The network's equity focus is another factor in the transfer of agency. Because equity issues tend to provoke controversy in the wider community, and often within a school system itself, the stakes get raised when conversation turns to issues of racial and socioeconomic inequity. It's been our observation that as the level of risk rises, so, too, does the level of investment in the work and ownership around the goals and outcomes.

BALANCING STABILITY WITH FLEXIBILITY TO INNOVATE AND EVOLVE

A core practice of the network from the outset has been employing instructional rounds as a way to delve into the instructional core. Rounds have been both a source of stability and an example of the network's innovation and evolution. About 40% of network sessions have been instructional rounds visits.

Drawing on the medical rounds model, in which groups of physicians observe and discuss a medical or nursing problem, instructional rounds involve direct observation of classroom practice by small groups of educators and a debriefing process

where evidence gathered from observations is organized into patterns. Elizabeth City, Richard Elmore, Sarah Fiarman, and Lee Teitel, authors of *Instructional Rounds in Education*, identify four essential elements of instructional rounds:

1. Leaders of the school to be visited identify a **problem of practice** that is visible in the instructional core and pertains to the school's and/or district's overall strategic direction in advance of the rounds visit.
2. Observers **visit classrooms** while teaching and learning are taking place and gather detailed and nonjudgmental evidence that relates to the identified problem of practice.
3. The teams that collect evidence in classrooms share and analyze their findings in an observation **debrief**, identifying patterns that shed light on the problem of practice.
4. Drawing on the evidence and patterns, participants brainstorm preliminary "**next level of work**" considerations for using resources to make progress on addressing the problem of practice (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009).

Instructional rounds keep the network's focus and work grounded in classroom practice and sharpen participants' lenses around the observation of the instructional core. As a community fundamentally devoted to learning, the network has been open to continual evolution and adaptation of practices, including instructional rounds.

Although a focus on equity has always been central to the work of Panasonic Foundation, we found in our first two years of instructional rounds visits that equity was not a focal point. Following that realization, the design team and the network as a whole made a commitment to centralize equity in our work as a community. This meant that problems of practice for rounds visits needed to focus on equity issues.

The practice in the context of our own community continued to evolve. We found ourselves renaming the practice "equity rounds visits" after introducing some adaptations. Instead of identifying a single school with an equity-focused problem of practice, superintendent members who host visits sometimes identify an equity-focused problem of practice at the district level and select several schools for involvement in the equity rounds visit.

In one instance, network members together with staff members of Jersey City Public Schools, the host for that event, visited four high schools simultaneously. The district provided an overarching equity-focused problem of practice ("How do we implement with fidelity innovative, research-based strategies that support high intellectual performance and personalize learning to meet the diverse strengths and interests of all students?"), and each school identified a problem of practice aligned with the district's.

Equity rounds visits now invariably include multiple data sources along with classroom observations. This may include interviews with staff members and students and looking at student work samples.

In years seven and eight, network members developed goals for addressing an equity issue in their school system along with a theory of action for making progress against those goals. A number of districts, for example, have focused on equity goals such as “narrow achievement gaps by expanding access to advanced coursework, including AP,” and the network has become a crucial place for sharing and advancing the work so far (Roegman & Hatch, 2016). When the network is not visiting schools, a portion of the day is generally set aside for presenting updates on equity goal work and using a protocol for receiving feedback from other network members on the issues and questions presented.

**MEMBERS ACTING ON WHAT IS LEARNED
BACK IN THEIR DISTRICTS**

Network members value the monthly sessions, but the learning and the application of learning are not confined to these cross-district face-to-face meetings. The network’s documentation reports and related studies reveal that a good deal of communication between and among members and among superintendents and their district colleagues takes place away from the sessions (Hatch & Roegman, 2012).

Perhaps an even stronger indicator of success may be what is taking place in those superintendents’ school districts. Consider, for example, Marcia Lyles, superintendent of Jersey City Public Schools. “I wanted to connect to other education leaders doing the work in the same environment,” Lyles says of her original hopes in joining the network. She was new in her first superintendency in New Jersey, having previously served as superintendent of the largest district in Delaware, which followed her tenure as a senior district leader in New York City.

The network’s equity rounds visits led Lyles to think about how to shape a systemwide conversation in her district that would focus on equity, the instructional core, and the relationship between the two. “How do we share and build community around that?” she asked herself.

During her second year in the network, Lyles developed a plan for instituting instructional rounds with an equity focus in schools throughout her district. She engaged several network design team members to conduct rounds training sessions with district and school leaders in August and December of 2015 and began conducting rounds visits in Jersey City schools in January 2016. By the end of the 2015-16 school year, 100% of school leaders in the district had participated in at least one rounds visit, and 40% of school leaders had hosted a visit.

Jersey City is by no means an exception. During the 2015-16 school year, at least seven network superintendents had instituted instructional rounds or equity rounds visits in their own

districts. And all members had developed equity goals and related theories of action for advancing the work in their districts.

BROADENING THE CONVERSATION

One practice that has facilitated this transfer of learning and practice is the inclusion of district colleagues, typically an administrator leading the district curriculum and instruction efforts or a school principal, in some network sessions.

The trust that has developed among superintendents and design team members in community has been at a high enough level to extend and include district colleagues when they are invited to join. This broadening of the conversation helps give it real-world application in the district context.

“This is a network of individuals backed with a tremendous design team that helps you think through issues of equity and success for all kids,” observed network member David Aderhold, superintendent of West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District.

Superintendents play a unique role in school districts: They’re the ones who are directly accountable to the school board, and all employees are ultimately accountable to them. Superintendents also can have an outsized influence on a system’s goals and efforts to advance the work of equity and excellence.

And yet there is not an abundance of opportunity for superintendents to engage in their own professional learning. Our experience with the New Jersey Network of Superintendents indicates that employing core practices in bringing superintendents together regularly as a community of practice with a persistently tight focus on equity and the improvement of instructional practice can be a powerful way to address this crucial need.

REFERENCES

City, E.A., Elmore, R.F., Fiarman, S.E., & Teitel, L. (2009). *Instructional rounds in education: A network approach to improving teaching and learning.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Hatch, T. & Roegman, R. (2012). Out of isolation: Superintendents band together to improve equity and instruction in their districts. *JSD*, 33(6), 37-41.

Roegman, R. & Hatch, T. (2016). The AP lever for boosting access, success, and equity. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 97(5), 20-25.

Thompson, S. (2011, November). A community of system-level instructional leaders. *Strategies*, 15(1), 3-14.

•

Scott Thompson (sthompson@foundation.us.panasonic.com) is assistant executive director of the Panasonic Foundation. ■

Superintendents are the ones who are directly accountable to the school board, and all employees are ultimately accountable to them.