

# JSD

THE LEARNING FORWARD JOURNAL

TO ASSESS  
IMPACT, KNOW  
WHAT TO  
MEASURE p. 42

Creative  
tension  
boosts  
teachers'  
work in  
literacy p. 28

Core practices fuel  
superintendents'  
equity focus p. 32

NEIGHBORING  
DISTRICTS MAKE  
GREAT LEARNING  
PARTNERS p. 22

## COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE

SOLVING PROBLEMS WITH  
COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE



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# JSD

The  
Learning Forward  
Journal

DECEMBER 2016,  
VOLUME 37, NO. 6



**theme:**  
**COLLECTIVE  
INTELLIGENCE**  
SOLVING  
PROBLEMS  
WITH  
COMMUNITIES  
OF PRACTICE

- 8 UP CLOSE**  
DEEP SMARTS  
START HERE  
Redesign PD Community of Practice
- By the numbers
  - Problems of practice
  - 22 districts

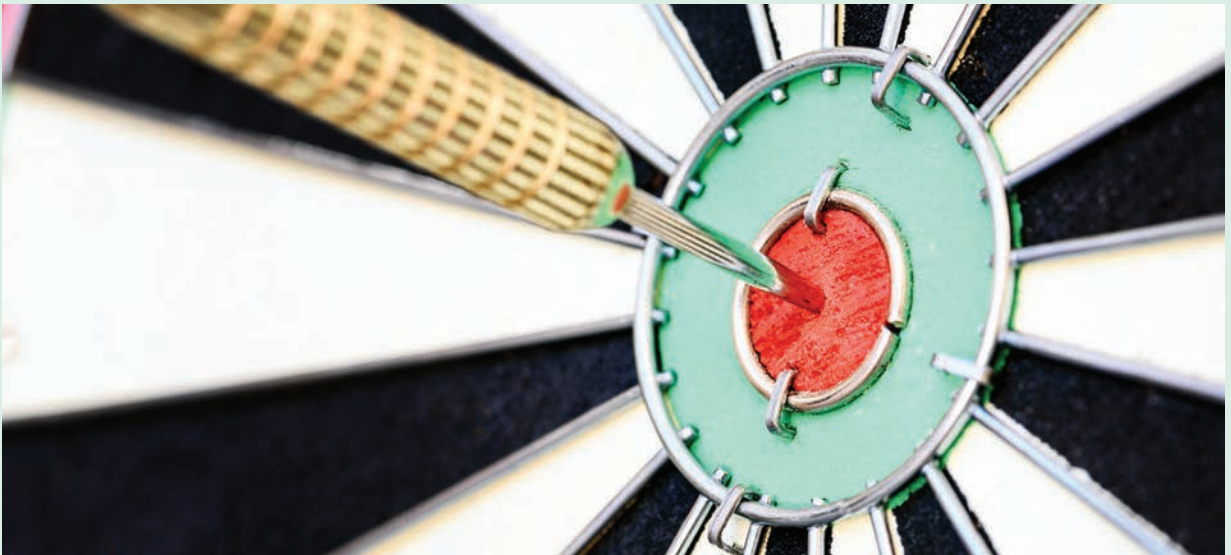
- 10 The power of thinking big.**  
**By Eric Celeste**  
Learning Forward created the Redesign PD Community of Practice to add structure and support to the community of practice model, take it across systems, and use it to help large groups of educators wrestle with their most vexing concerns.

- 12 6 key features of a successful community of practice.**  
**By Michelle King**  
Successful communities of practice have six specific characteristics that allow the experience to be rewarding for the members, the students they serve, and the education field in general.



**I'm learning from my peers and contributing to better outcomes for everyone involved. It's truly an empowering experience when teachers are invested."**

— *Tiffany Scott, accelerated resource teacher, Mount Dora Middle School, Lake County Schools, Florida, p. 39*



**16 Goals: Coherence and relevance:**

3 DISTRICTS FOCUS ON QUALITY OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING.

**By Linda Jacobson**

Loudon County and Shelby County school districts in Tennessee and Bridgeport Public Schools in Connecticut work to build a professional learning system that is coherent and relevant to teachers, meaning that the learning is useful, timely, and related to their practice in the classroom.

**18 Taking a measure of impact:**

2 COLORADO DISTRICTS CALIBRATE THE EFFECTS OF HIGH-QUALITY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING.

**By Linda Jacobson**

District leaders in Denver and Jefferson County develop strategies to make teacher professional learning as useful as possible.



**features**

**42 Make evaluation count:**

TO ASSESS IMPACT, KNOW WHAT TO MEASURE.

**By Amy Pendray and Jennifer Crockett**

Educators in California's Long Beach Unified School District, a member of Learning Forward's Redesign PD Community of Practice, clarify their understanding of evaluation and develop tools to better measure impact.

## 22 Neighbors make great learning partners:

4 TEXAS DISTRICTS WORK TOGETHER TO BUILD STRONG PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SYSTEMS.

**By Kay Psencik, Steven Ebell, and Lisa V. McCulley**

Four southeast Texas school districts are working together as part of a three-year initiative to improve professional learning in their districts. The community is based on the concept that districts benefit when they can share knowledge with each other.

## 28 Creative tension:

TURN THE CHALLENGES OF LEARNING TOGETHER INTO OPPORTUNITIES.

**By Christina L. Dobbs, Jacy Ippolito, and Megin Charner-Laird**

Participants in a high school literacy initiative learn to navigate the productive tensions that arise as they grapple with and attempt new instructional practices.

## 32 Core practices fuel superintendents' equity focus.

**By Scott Thompson**

The New Jersey Network of Superintendents' 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.

## 38 Task mastery:

A BACKWARD APPROACH TO DESIGNING INSTRUCTION PROPELS TEACHING FORWARD.

**By Suzanne Simons**

Literacy Design Collaborative's instructional design system guides teachers in a backward design approach that helps teachers create tasks and, from there, strong instructional plans to teach the tasks.

## 46 Foundations for success:

YOUNG PEOPLE LEARN BEST THROUGH ACTIVE AND REFLECTIVE EXPERIENCES.

**By Jenny Nagaoka**

A 2016 report synthesizes decades of research, theory, and practice to uncover the kinds of learning experiences that lead children to a productive and fulfilling adulthood. *This article is sponsored by The Wallace Foundation.*



## departments

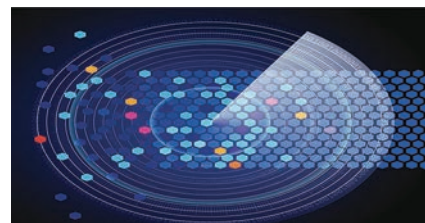
### 4 FROM THE EXECUTIVE EDITOR

BY TRACY CROW

### 6 ESSENTIALS

KEEPING UP WITH HOT TOPICS IN THE FIELD

- Principals at work
- Choosing principals
- Teaching attributes
- Teachers and Common Core
- Principal prep
- Turnaround leaders



### 50 TOOL

RADAR protocol guides planning.

### 56 LESSONS FROM RESEARCH

BY JOELLEN KILLION

Instructional rounds contribute to communities of practice.

### 59 learningforward.org

Site highlights.

### 60 @ LEARNING FORWARD

NEWS AND NOTES

- 2016 Learning Team Award
- On Board
- Book Club
- New login process
- Projects in brief

### 66 ABSTRACTS

for December 2016 JSD

### 68 FROM THE DIRECTOR

BY STEPHANIE HIRSH

How the Redesign PD Community of Practice can benefit you.



## The perfect recipe for improvement

I was talking to my sister-in-law about butternut squash the other night. As we did some meal planning for Thanksgiving, I let her know that a) we had way too much last year; and b) preparing it always takes longer than she thinks. I don't know that she appreciated hearing that, but my goal was to make our dinner better this year — not just tastier but also more efficient and relaxing.

My husband and I have been hosting Thanksgiving at our home for many years. Sometimes we have 15 people, sometimes 26. It took us more than a decade to realize how much we would benefit from knowing what we had done the year before as we do our shopping and prepping. Just as important, I needed a way to keep track of our efforts to improve on the classics. (Parsnips in the mashed potatoes got a thumbs-down.)

Fortunately now we have data, in the form of a list we write after the meal. We note quantities, recipes, attendees, preferences, and give a star to the big hits.

We've always tried to make dinner better every year, but until we had data, it was hard to know if we were improving. So in our Thanksgiving cycle of continuous improvement, data appears to be the critical step to getting

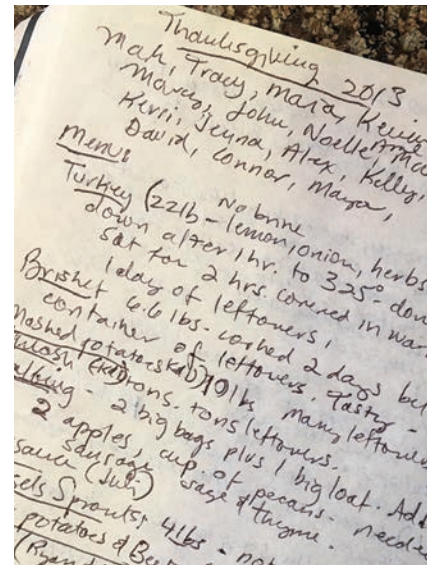
**Tracy Crow (tracy.crow@learningforward.org) is director of communications for Learning Forward.**

better. Until we have information about our performance, how can we set goals or know if we have achieved them?

There are many variations on an improvement cycle. At its most basic is a three-step plan, do, reflect version. Learning Forward refers to a seven-step cycle of continuous improvement in the Standards for Professional Learning. The Redesign PD Community of Practice (see pp. 8-9) uses a cycle of inquiry with four steps that follow a visioning process. Learning Forward Executive Director Stephanie Hirsh and I are publishing in the next few weeks a book on a learning team cycle that follows five steps.

Central to all of Learning Forward's cycles is a deliberate step for learning, a concept essential also to all of the examples of communities of practice featured in this issue of *JSD*. It's true that each step of an improvement cycle includes inherent opportunities for learning. For example, just looking carefully at data offers information that can help us improve, no matter the endeavor. However, unless educators create an intentional step for learning, improvement will only advance so far.

While learning is a specific cycle step, the focus on learning informs every other step of the cycle. Setting goals, for example, must include learning goals for adults along with student learning goals. Reflecting on progress or documenting impact can't just analyze results for students but must also consider how adult



Thanksgiving dinner data guides us.

learning changed practices. A cycle of continuous improvement means that the steps connect and continuously inform what happens next.

Learning Forward emphasizes an improvement cycle through so many different mechanisms because of a cycle's power to keep educators on a learning and growth trajectory. A cycle's steps are actionable, the results are measurable, and it offers multiple entry points for making changes that impact outcomes.

And, while our holiday attempt at continuous improvement is yielding better results at the dinner table, I'm realizing we're going to have to invest time in learning new skills next time if we really want a better meal. ■



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## PRINCIPALS AT WORK

### Principals' Time, Tasks, and Professional Development: An Analysis of Schools and Staffing Survey Data

*Institute of Education Sciences, October 2016*

This study describes how principals reported spending their time and what professional development they reported participating in, based on data collected through the Schools and Staffing Survey by the National

Center for Education Statistics during the 2011-12 school year. The study analyzes schools by grade level, poverty level, and within poverty level by whether schools made adequate yearly

progress on student performance the previous year.

Overall, principals reported spending an average of 59 hours a week on the job, with most of their time spent on internal administrative tasks. Principals of high-poverty schools that did not make adequate yearly progress reported spending more time on the job per week than did principals of high-poverty schools that made adequate yearly progress. Regardless of school poverty level, principals of schools that made adequate yearly progress reported spending more time on administrative tasks, curriculum- and teaching-related tasks, and parent interactions than did principals of schools that did not make adequate yearly progress.

Though almost all principals reported participating in professional development, the most frequently reported type was workshop or

conference attendance. The least frequently reported type was university courses.

<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=4488>

## CHOOSING PRINCIPALS

### Great Leaders for Great Schools: How Four Charter Networks Recruit, Develop, and Select Principals

*Center for American Progress, October 2016*

To deepen the education field's understanding of effective leadership development practices and provide models for districts and other charter networks, this report examines case studies of four high-performing networks of charter schools that are generally outperforming other schools in their areas and posting strong graduation rates. The charter school networks include Achievement First Public Charter Schools, Green Dot Public Schools, IDEA Public Schools, and High Tech High, which together represent 110 schools.

This report shows how these networks identify, recruit, select, and match principals to their schools. While the school models, geographies, and even principal job descriptions may differ, patterns emerge. Innovative districts are beginning to employ similar strategies, and efforts are underway to spread best hiring and development practices across

the country. This report shares recommendations for scaling best practices across the education sector.

[www.americanprogress.org/issues/education/reports/2016/10/03/145191/great-leaders-for-great-schools](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education/reports/2016/10/03/145191/great-leaders-for-great-schools)



## TEACHING ATTRIBUTES

### The Heart of Great Teaching: Pearson Global Survey of Educator Effectiveness

*Pearson Education, 2016*

Pearson surveyed more than 13,000 people in 23 countries asking the question: "What do you think are the most important qualities of an effective teacher?" The most common response, regardless of country, gender, or other factors, is that relationships between teachers and students matter most. The top five most valued qualities for teachers across 23 countries are: The ability to develop trusting, compassionate relationships with students; patient, caring, and kind personality; professionalism; subject-matter knowledge; and knowledge of learners. The survey explores how people answered by country, role, development level, and many more characteristics. The report provides recommendations for how to use these findings.

[www.pearson.com/efficacy-and-research/schools-education-research/research-reports/global-survey-of-educator-effectiveness.html](http://www.pearson.com/efficacy-and-research/schools-education-research/research-reports/global-survey-of-educator-effectiveness.html)







## TEACHERS AND COMMON CORE

### Listening to and Learning

#### From Teachers:

#### A Summary of Focus Groups on the Common Core and Assessments

*Center on Education Policy, October 2016*

This report summarizes discussions from five elementary teacher focus groups conducted in Delaware, Illinois, Utah, and Wisconsin in spring and summer 2016. Topics include Common Core, curricula, instructional materials, Common Core-aligned state assessments, student achievement data from those assessments, and accountability. The report includes policy recommendations based on the discussions, including the recommendation that states and districts provide teachers with relevant professional learning so they can better use assessment results to improve their instruction.

[www.cep-dc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=1461](http://www.cep-dc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=1461)

## PRINCIPAL PREP

### A Bold Move to Better Prepare

#### Principals:

#### The Illinois Story

*The Wallace Foundation, October 2016*

The first episode of this four-part video series details how the state passed tougher guidelines for program accreditation and required all programs to reapply for state approval. This resulted in fewer but stronger programs and candidates

who actually wanted to lead schools. The second and third episodes profile preparation programs at New Leaders Chicago and the University of Illinois/Chicago that helped inspire the new standards. In the last episode, Chicago principals describe how these innovative training programs prepared them for the real demands of leading a school.

[www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Pages/Series-Shows-How-Illinois-Successfully-Revamped-Requirements-for-Principal-Preparation.aspx](http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Pages/Series-Shows-How-Illinois-Successfully-Revamped-Requirements-for-Principal-Preparation.aspx)

## TURNAROUND LEADERS

### Coaching and Developing Turnaround Leader Actions

*Center on Great Teachers and Leaders, Center on School Turnaround, Public Impact, and University of Virginia Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education, October 2016*

School turnaround requires strong leaders with the necessary competencies and skills to take high-leverage actions that support school success. Coaching can help school leaders develop these capabilities. This professional learning module on coaching turnaround leader actions is free and designed to support regional comprehensive centers, state education agencies, and districts in developing a strategic plan for providing this crucial coaching to school leaders.

<http://centeronschoolturnaround.org/coaching-turnaround-leader-modules>

## JSD STAFF

Executive editor: Tracy Crow

Editor: Eric Celeste

Managing editor: Sue Chevalier

Designer: Kitty Black

## HOW TO GET IN TOUCH

*JSD* is published six times a year to promote improvement in the quality of professional learning as a means to improve student learning in K-12 schools. Contributions from members and nonmembers of Learning Forward are welcome.

**Manuscripts:** Manuscripts and editorial mail should be sent to Christy Colclasure ([christy.colclasure@learningforward.org](mailto:christy.colclasure@learningforward.org)). Learning Forward prefers to receive manuscripts by email. Notes to assist authors in preparing a manuscript are provided at [www.learningforward.org/publications/jsd/writers-guidelines](http://www.learningforward.org/publications/jsd/writers-guidelines). Themes for upcoming issues of *JSD* are available at [www.learningforward.org/publications/jsd/upcoming-themes](http://www.learningforward.org/publications/jsd/upcoming-themes).

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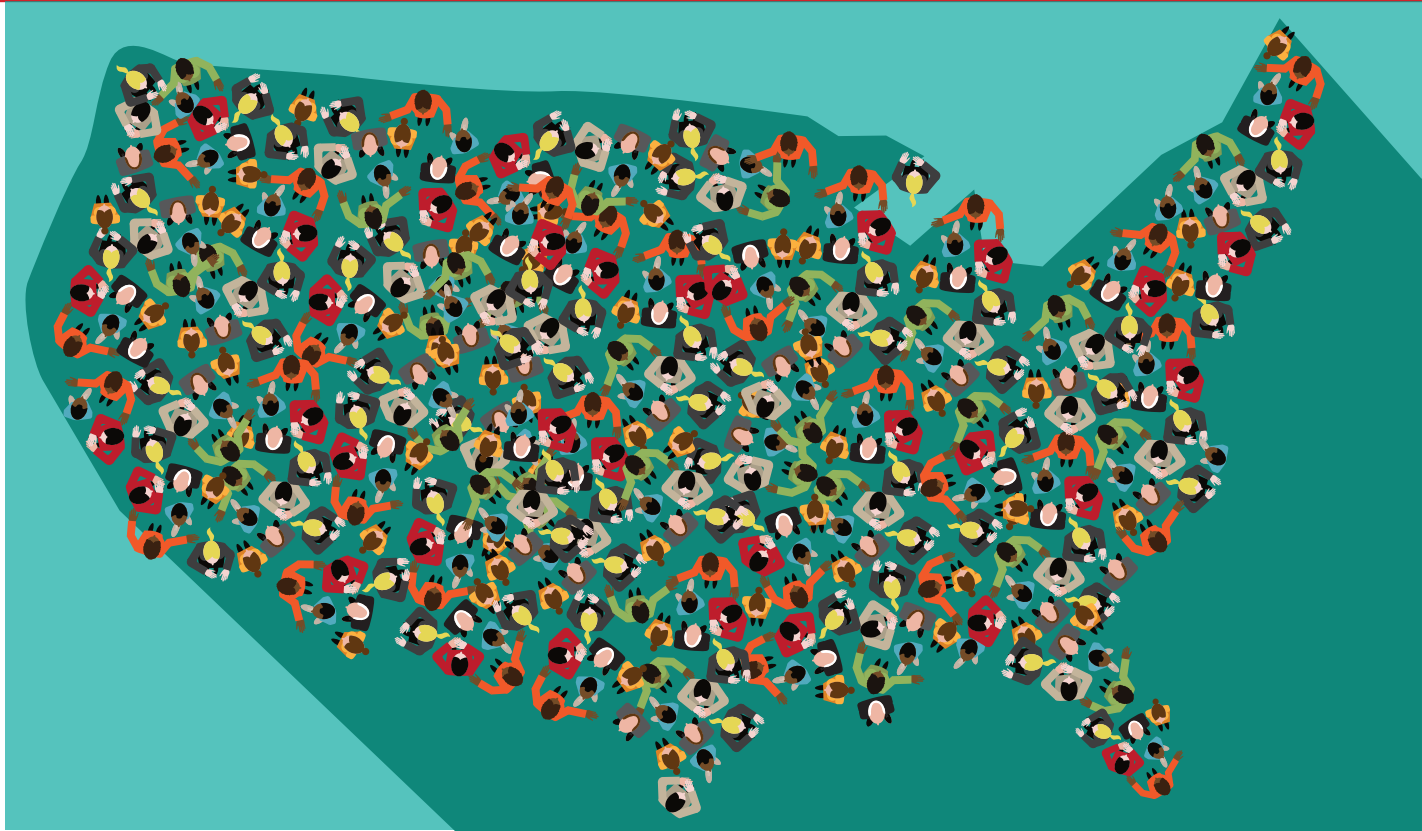
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JOURNAL OF STAFF DEVELOPMENT  
ISSN 0276-928X

*JSD* is a benefit of membership in Learning Forward. \$89 of annual membership covers a year's subscription to *JSD*. *JSD* is published bimonthly. Periodicals postage paid at Wheelersburg, OH 45694 and additional offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to *JSD*, 504 S. Locust St., Oxford, OH 45056. © Copyright, Learning Forward, 2016. All rights reserved.

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# REDESIGN PD COMMUNITY



**I**n December 2015, Learning Forward launched the Redesign PD Community of Practice to support 20 of the nation's leading school districts and charter management organizations in addressing systemwide educator and student learning priorities. The community — which has since grown to 22 districts — engages teams from the districts in identifying their local professional learning challenges and then creating scalable solutions. Learning Forward serves as the facilitator and coordinator of the community, offering expertise and support during face-to-face and virtual meetings.

Over the course of 18 months, district teams in the community of practice engage in continuous improvement cycles to improve

how they manage their professional learning systems, with each team conducting multiple inquiry cycles to propel rapid learning and improvement. Complementing this inquiry work are opportunities to problem solve collectively with other districts in the community.

Since one of Learning Forward's goals for the program is to capture and publish lessons learned to members, stakeholders, and the education community, we thought

it best to provide a one-year update from the field. Here is a snapshot of that work that we hope amplifies the hard work being done, as well as gives members a better understanding of how it aligns with or differs from other systemwide collaborations discussed in this issue of *JSD*.

Learning Forward's  
**REDESIGN PD  
COMMUNITY  
OF PRACTICE**  
A REPORT  
FROM THE FIELD

## ▶ BY THE NUMBERS

- **22** school systems
- **> 3,900** schools
- **2.5 million** students
- **> 174,000** certified educators
- **\$500 million to \$1 billion** spent on professional learning
- **11** states represented

# OF PRACTICE

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE FIRST 6 MONTHS OF LEARNING FORWARD'S 18-MONTH, 22-DISTRICT INITIATIVE

## ► PROBLEMS OF PRACTICE

Each system selects one of two problems of practice as its focus.

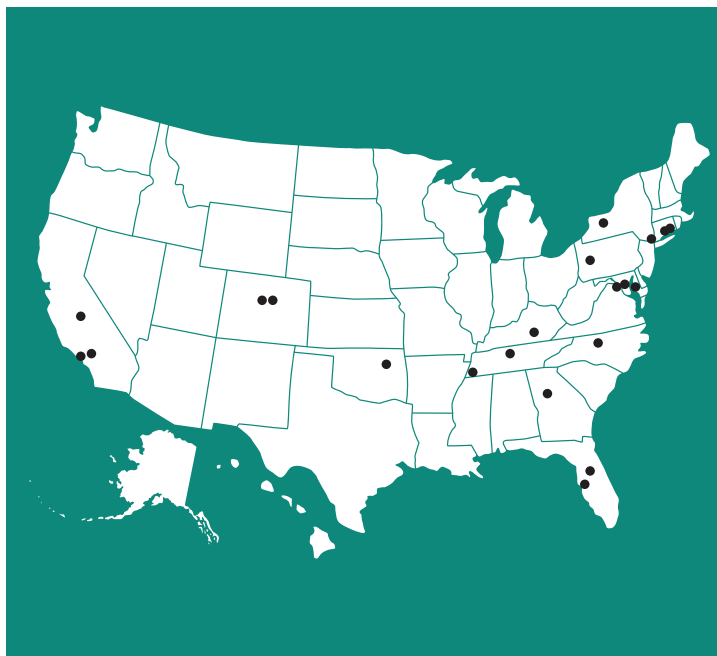
MEASURING IMPACT	ENSURING COHERENCE / RELEVANCE
HOW DO WE MEASURE the impact of professional learning experiences on teacher practice in formative and summative ways to inform teacher, school, and system decisions to drive continuous improvement?	HOW DO WE ENSURE that decisions made at the central office, school, and teacher level ensure both a coherent and relevant learning experience for teachers that improves their practice?
<b>DISTRICTS:</b> Denver (CO) Fresno USD (CA) Fulton County (GA) Jefferson County (CO) Lake County (FL) Long Beach (CA) New Haven (CT) New York City (NY) Prince George's County (MD) Riverside (CA) Syracuse (NY)	<b>DISTRICTS:</b> Aspire (Charter management organization) Bridgeport (CT) District of Columbia Guilford County (NC) Hillsborough (FL) Knox County (TN) Loudon County (TN) Metro Nashville (TN) Pittsburgh (PA) Shelby Unified (TN) Tulsa (OK)

## ► 22 DISTRICTS

- Aspire Public Schools
- Bridgeport Public Schools, Bridgeport, CT
- Denver Public Schools, Denver, CO
- District of Columbia Public Schools, DC
- Fresno Unified School District, Fresno, CA
- Fulton County Schools, Atlanta, GA
- Guilford County Schools, Greensboro, NC
- Hillsborough County Public Schools, Tampa, FL
- Jefferson County Public Schools, Golden, CO
- Knox County Schools, Barbourville, KY
- Lake County Schools, Tavares, FL
- Long Beach Unified School District, Long Beach, CA
- Loudon County Public Schools, Ashburn, VA
- Metro Nashville Public Schools, Nashville, TN
- New Haven Public Schools, New Haven, CT
- New York City Public Schools, New York, NY
- Pittsburgh Public Schools, Pittsburgh, PA
- Prince George's County Public Schools, Upper Marlboro, MD
- Riverside Unified School District, Riverside, CA
- Shelby County Unified School District, Memphis, TN
- Syracuse City School District, Syracuse, NY
- Tulsa Public Schools, Tulsa, OK

► **“We want to focus on leveraging resources to reach each and every teacher with the support they need.”**

— Nakia Hardy,  
 chief academic officer,  
 Guilford County  
 Schools



# THE POWER OF THINKING BIG

By Eric Celeste

**W**ho knew that groups of Yucatan midwives, Liberian tailors, meat cutters, and insurance claims processors would contribute so mightily to improving public education? Etienne

Wenger knew. Wenger, an educational theorist and practitioner, with his writing partner studied the way these groups indoctrinated new members and apprentices. Their observations on what they called “situated learning” led to Wenger’s seminal work *Communities of Practice* (Wenger, 1998), in which he established the concept that would become what we now know as the definition of communities of practice: groups of people who share a concern or a pas-

sion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

As such, communities of practice have become important tools for districts striving to improve teacher quality in a way that improves student outcomes. Communities of practice have increasingly been used to help groups of educators share concerns, improve expertise, and share knowledge. Conceptually, communities of practice are different than project teams or communities of interest. For example: Membership isn’t defined by task as it is in project teams, and members of a community of practice are active practitioners, not simply people with an interest in a field or subject area.

Often, the formation of a community of practice is organic, whether in education or other fields. A group forms around challenges presented by new initiatives or to share

*Continued on p. 15*



# 6 KEY FEATURES OF A SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

By Michelle King

**M**ost educators probably know what it feels like to be part of an unproductive professional learning community — one where the topics range from last night’s TV episodes to everyone’s weekend plans before coming around to instructional issues. Other communities might just feel like another staff meeting with a list of announcements. But there are ways to create strong communities of practice that allow schools to address common challenges while also benefitting individual members.

The Redesign PD Community of Practice involves representatives from 21 districts and one charter manage-

ment organization who are all facing professional learning challenges and working toward solutions that can improve teaching and learning in their districts and across the nation. Facilitated by Learning Forward, the community is also demonstrating how a productive community functions.

Successful communities have six specific characteristics that allow the experience to be rewarding for the members, the students they serve, and the education field in general.

## **1 CLEAR FOCUS ON A SHARED PROBLEM OF PRACTICE.**

The 22 systems are all working to make professional learning more responsive to teachers’ needs while also looking for the best way to measure whether those professional learning opportunities are improving teachers’ practice.

Without the community, Julie Leopold, director of



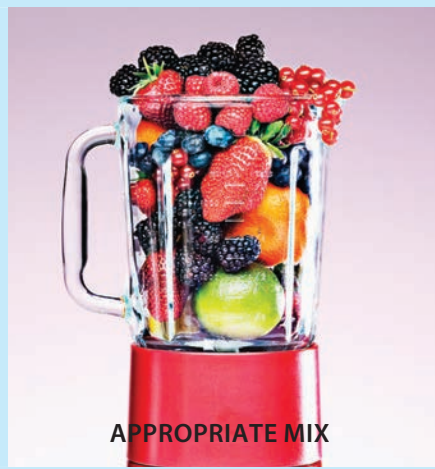
CLEAR FOCUS



ACTIVE LEARNING



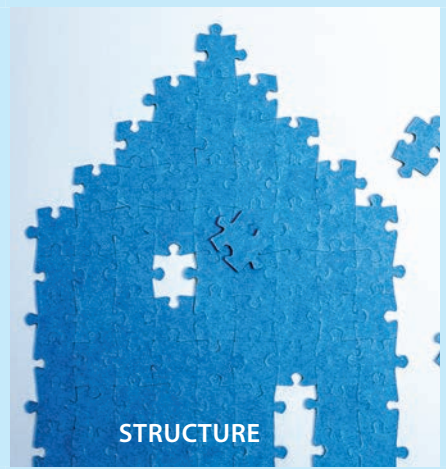
COLLECTIVE OWNERSHIP



APPROPRIATE MIX



COMMITMENT



STRUCTURE

instructional policy at the New York City Department of Education, says her district probably wouldn't have had the chance to address those challenges in a meaningful way.

"We're benefiting from focusing in on a problem that feels potentially very impactful, but that we otherwise wouldn't have been able to prioritize," she says. "We are looking forward to hearing from experts on evaluating impact and learning how other districts are tackling this knotty problem."

While some of the districts are concentrating specifically on measuring the impact of professional learning, others are working to bring more coherence to their systems.

In Georgia's Fulton County Public Schools, Lydia

Conway, executive director for professional learning, says being part of a community of practice "really resonates with us."

"We are inspired by how this work will improve and further support the district in which we serve," she says. "This work is challenging us to work smarter and take risks in new directions."

## 2 ACTIVE LEARNING THROUGH PROCESS OF INQUIRY.

The district teams are following an ongoing cycle that begins with assessing their current state in relation to the

*Continued on p. 14*

*Continued from p. 13*

milestones they want to reach, gathering information on how to close gaps between their current state and the milestones, planning detailed actions how to reach those goals, and implementing those actions and gathering data on what worked and what didn't.

By the middle of 2017, when the community completes its work, the teams are expected to repeat the cycle several times.

### 3 COLLECTIVE OWNERSHIP.

Each team member has a role in working through the cycle and testing out ideas as teams design professional learning for teachers and improve structures already in place.

The Community Advisory Board, a governance structure intended to contribute to community decisions, describes collective ownership across three levels. The advisory board is responsible for holding the community accountable to agreed-upon benchmarks and timelines. The board also models authentic involvement for other members of the community. The hub, which is Learning Forward, is obligated to share clear expectations and effectively facilitate the community, while each individual system does the work back in its district and regularly communicates progress.

### 4 APPROPRIATE MIX OF PARTNERS.

Each district team includes representatives who can bring different perspectives to the problem and to finding solutions, such as district-level officials, a teacher, a principal, or an instructional coach. In their different positions, they can help communicate to peers about changes and new opportunities for professional learning.

The various perspectives on the team help to ensure the work remains true to established goals and reaches agreed-upon milestones. Participation by senior members of the district leadership team can protect those committed to the work from being pulled to other “urgent needs.”

### 5 SUFFICIENT COMMITMENT TO SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION.

In addition to meeting together in their districts, teams come together periodically for dedicated “team time” and to learn from each other. These gatherings allow team members to see how other districts in the community approach the same issues. In an activity called “targeted networking,” districts present their overall plan and what they’ve implemented so far while members of the other teams ask questions.

Leopold says she found the format “to be a very helpful way to zoom in on key work and challenges of our own as well as of other districts.”

But the teams are also sharing what they are learning outside of official gatherings.

**The various perspectives on the team help to ensure the work remains true to established goals and reaches agreed-upon milestones. Participation by senior members of the district leadership team can protect those committed to the work from being pulled to other “urgent needs.”**

“We’ve found the informal conversations we have with districts to surprisingly be the most rewarding,” Conway says. “One statement or thought during a conversation will lead to the most intriguing connections and dialogue around an issue our district is having.”

### 6 AN EFFECTIVE STRUCTURE OF GOVERNANCE AND DECISION MAKING.

Each team has an executive sponsor — a high-level administrator in the district or charter management organization who can provide support and make sure team members get the time and resources they need to design and implement their plans.

Ultimately, as school systems in the community share ideas with each other and more broadly, the districts will provide examples for the nation on how to improve professional learning for teachers.

For instance, Marna Messer, an assistant director in Jefferson County Public Schools in Colorado and project administrator of the district’s Innovative Professional Development initiative, says her team shared information about Jefferson County’s summer learning institute with the team from Fulton County Public Schools in Georgia. In return, they are learning about Fulton’s personalized learning initiative. Jefferson County team members are also hoping to spread what they’re learning across their state.

“We’re working with Denver to share our work with measuring impact,” Messer says, “so that we can think about how we can support each other and help influence other districts in Colorado.”

Conway agrees that being part of a community of practice is not only about sharing what each district has done — it’s about being open to learn from each other and push toward new solutions. Her team has also set up conference calls with other teams so they can dive into the details of how the districts are approaching the problem.

“Hearing how others have navigated through similar waters has challenged our own assumptions,” she says, “and really changed the course of action we were taking in some instances.”

**Michelle King ([michelle.king@learningforward.org](mailto:michelle.king@learningforward.org)) is Learning Forward’s associate director of communities. ■**



*Continued from p. 10*

tips or best practices. Social platforms and group networking technology in the workplace have made this practice remarkably easy.

But scaling the benefits of communities of practice requires a more rigorous, intentional approach. Last year, Learning Forward realized that it could add structure and support to the community of practice model, take it across systems, and use it to help large groups of educators wrestle with their most vexing concerns. That's why Learning Forward, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, created the Redesign PD Community of Practice — to serve as the hub in a multisystem effort to capture knowledge about successes and failures that will undergird future efforts to redesign professional learning systems.

Michelle King, Learning Forward's associate director of communities, was brought in late last year to lead this effort. "We believe in the power of collaboration and community, and we know that there are gaps within the systems of professional learning, within our school districts. We asked ourselves, 'How could we change that?'"

The Redesign PD Community of Practice was designed to tackle problems Learning Forward has long identified as systemic: that the impact of professional development initiatives on teacher practice or student outcomes is not well understood; that professional learning is often incoherent or too diluted to have sustained benefit; and that few systems have decision-making processes for continuously improving their professional learning portfolios. So knowing how to improve teacher practice didn't help if results couldn't be achieved at scale.

One way to change that dynamic, King and the Redesign PD team realized, was to harness the power of collaboration across systems to solve their most pressing challenge. "We needed to find out what are the needs and the problems that must be solved," King says, "and then we need to attack those together as a true community of learners."

Thus in December 2015 Learning Forward launched the Redesign PD Community of Practice in 20 U.S. school districts and charter management organizations — the group has since grown to 22 — to improve the design and implementation of professional learning. Its mission is to ensure that teachers measurably improve their practice and thereby accelerate student growth. Each participating system has committed to making dramatic progress on one of two self-identified problems of practice by mid-2017:

- How to strengthen the measurement of the impact of professional learning on teacher practice and make decisions based on these measures; or
- How to increase the coherence and relevance of professional learning, such that teachers experience professional learning as useful, timely, and relevant to their classroom practice,



and abandon those initiatives that distract or dilute teachers' focus.

The scale of this effort — the participating systems collectively enroll more than 5% of public school students in the country — is why you'll read about snapshots and lessons learned from the field in this issue of *JSD*.

But that's not the only discussion of collaborative learning the issue discusses. You'll read about other examples of collective impact, the broad cross-district and cross-state coordination that can lead to large-scale learning change. Whether it's a network of superintendents in New Jersey or literacy teachers in New England or entire districts in Southern California, these stories strongly suggest that, as Suzanne Simons writes in her article that begins on p. 38, "Collective work done well can accelerate their learning and the achievement of their students." If that's the outcome of a well-structured community of practice, then by definition it's a community worth exploring.

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Eric Celeste ([eric.celeste@learningforward.org](mailto:eric.celeste@learningforward.org)) is associate director of publications at Learning Forward. ■



# GOALS: COHERENCE AND RELEVANCE

**3 DISTRICTS FOCUS ON QUALITY  
OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

By Linda Jacobson

For more than a century, teachers in Tennessee's Loudon County School District have come together before the start of the school year for a professional development day. But not anymore.

For the first time this year, professional learning in the district will be based at each individual school — a result of the district's use of a new rubric, which states that professional learning should relate to the goals of learning communities, be supported by an administrator, and be useful to teachers in their classrooms. Principals were introduced to the rubric during an administrator academy over the summer.

"I didn't feel like I could stand in front of principals and tell them to run [professional development] through the rubric when I hadn't done it," says Mike Garren, the district's assistant director of schools.

Maria Warren, the district's supervisor for elementary education and Response to Intervention, adds that now when principals receive proposals for professional development, they can look at how the presentation and contents line up against their rubric.

### ENSURING THE QUALITY OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

When many departments offer professional learning in a district and even at each individual school, it can be tough to ensure that the learning is high quality. But that's what the teams from the Loudon County and Shelby County school districts in Tennessee and the Bridgeport Public Schools in Connecticut are working toward with new rubrics. As part of the Redesign PD community, all three systems chose to work on building a system of professional development that is coherent and relevant to teachers, meaning that the learning is useful, timely, and related

### CYCLE OF INQUIRY

Learn more about the Redesign PD Community of Practice Cycle of Inquiry at [www.learningforward.org/learning-opportunities/redesign-pd-community-of-practice/cycle-of-inquiry](http://www.learningforward.org/learning-opportunities/redesign-pd-community-of-practice/cycle-of-inquiry).

to their practice in the classroom.

"We are building a process to really have the district improvement plan drive the focus of the work and ultimately develop a few key priorities for schools to work on," says Terry Carroll, assistant superintendent of instruction for Bridgeport schools.

Creating a rubric, she adds, is a way for those providing professional development to better articulate how the professional learning is addressing specific needs. The Bridgeport team started with first developing a professional learning planning guide — a detailed set of questions to be asked about any professional learning offered. Questions include:

- Does your professional learning plan include strategies that support discourse and sharing among participants?
- Does your professional learning plan scaffold sessions to build on prior knowledge?
- Does your professional learning plan offer varied structures such as small-group, classroom-embedded, or tech-supported?

The guide has been introduced to different committees and focus groups and was used during table talk exercises with administrators. "We'll have fully vetted criteria by September," Carroll says. "The feedback has been positive." Schools have also been charged with developing professional learning advisory committees that will have the criteria to guide their work.

*Continued on p. 21*



# TAKING A MEASURE OF IMPACT

**2 COLORADO DISTRICTS CALIBRATE  
THE EFFECTS OF HIGH-QUALITY  
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

By Linda Jacobson

## Denver Public Schools

When Denver Public Schools joined the Redesign PD Community of Practice, leaders knew they needed to work on improving professional learning across the district. They had recently created a new Professional Learning Center and wanted to influence the learning delivered by central office departments and by instructional superintendents working with principals.

“Data showed that the professional learning from the central level was not that great,” says Theress Pidick, the district’s executive director of the Professional Learning Center. “We felt compelled to create this new role.”

That new role was the professional learning partner — a position that helps subject-matter experts and others provide educators with a high-quality learning experience. The first four professional learning partners hired planned to work with the central office experts as well as with the instructional superintendents who supervise principals. But that direction changed after Pidick realized that some administrators didn’t fully maximize the professional learning partners’ intended role.

“Initially there was some skepticism about why these roles were needed,” Pidick says, adding that now the professional learning partners are only working with the central office departments. “We went where we were needed and wanted the most.”

### CREATING A ‘ROBUST SERVICE MODEL’

And the demand for their services is growing. The team will expand from four to seven, and one department in particular — student services — has even allocated money for a professional learning partner position. The district also created a position for a professional learning analyst who will work as part of the evaluation team but will focus on trends among educators to better determine where they need more support.

Pidick’s team has created a service model that clearly describes what professional learning partners do, which is to introduce subject-matter experts to the district’s professional learning

resources, plan and design feedback, and observe practice and live sessions.

“We shifted from responding to requests to providing a real robust service model,” says Gabe DeMola, a professional learning partner.

Professional learning partners also collect and review feedback from participants in the actual sessions. While professional learning partners provide service to over a half-dozen departments, they have prioritized two areas for the district: training in early literacy for about 2,000 teachers and the roll-out of a new 9th- to 12th-grade English language arts curriculum that focuses on aligning Common Core literacy practices with Common Core resources. Roughly 150 teachers are part of that training, which will continue through the upcoming school year, says Lindsey Smith, director of K-12 literacy for the district.

The professional learning partner, Smith says, provided feedback on the professional development plan and “helped us to strengthen the PD sessions.”

### ‘MEETING THE DEMAND’

Pidick says it is an ongoing challenge to help departments understand how best to leverage the professional learning partner’s expertise and that they are there to support the design, delivery, and measurement of high-quality professional learning. The center is committed to implementing the new service model and is partnering with central departments to ensure the focus is on continuous improvement.

“Meeting the demand, even with the increased resources, will be a challenge,” she says, adding that her team is “constantly looking at how they spread their time.”

Compared to how professional learning took place before, professional learning partner Georgie Washington says the district has made significant progress.

“Before the creation of the center, there were many individuals and teams that had it on their radar to provide high-quality support for adults,” Washington says, adding that given

*Continued on p. 20*

*Continued from p. 19*

competing priorities and tight timelines, many struggled to ensure that best practices in adult learning also remained at the forefront.

Now, the departments can call on expert consultants and are making use of the resources “on what a day of PD should look like,” she says. “They are taking our tools and running with them.”

## Jefferson County

Tina Christensen, a 7th-grade English language arts teacher at Falcon Bluffs Middle School in Littleton, Colorado, has been wanting to improve the way she structures minilessons for her students. So she pulls up the district professional learning dashboard on her computer and adds a new “professional goal.” Creating the goal offers Christensen a variety of resources, such as videos and articles, and captures the “action items” she chooses to improve her practice.

Giving teachers this flexibility to choose the resources that meet their needs has been a high priority for Jefferson County Public Schools in Colorado, one of 22 school systems participating in the Redesign PD Community of Practice. But the team has also decided that it’s equally important to ensure that professional learning meets specific standards of quality.

“How do we make sure we lift up and support our teachers, but also make sure that it is high quality?” explains Marna Messer, the district’s assistant director of Innovative Professional Development (iPD) initiative.

When the district team first looked at the wide variety of professional learning opportunities the district provides, they realized that there had probably been more emphasis on the quality of the offering and not enough on how teachers were implementing what they had learned and whether data was being used to determine the impact of the learning.

So the team had some honest conversations about how to shift away from just providing professional learning and move in the direction of making sure teachers receive ongoing support tied to that learning.

### BECOMING A ‘GROWTH-ORIENTED SYSTEM’

As part of the Cycle of Inquiry that the Community of Practice districts use to address challenges and make progress, the team first engaged a group of about 150 people at the central office level in studying the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) and discussing what the district was doing to meet those standards.

“We weren’t always in the same place,” Messer says, adding that the next step involved developing some key elements to look for related to professional learning.

Because they initially received such diverse opinions from the larger group of 150 on how to measure professional learn-

**The challenge will be how to again spread understanding and ownership of the standards across schools. “If you go too big, you don’t get deep, you get compliance. There’s not enough buy-in.”**

— Marna Messer, Jefferson County Public Schools

ing, the team decided to scale back for the second cycle and test those “look-fors” with a smaller group. When the district holds its Launch, Learn and Lead summer institute in August, the smaller group of about 30 participants will apply those standards to the learning provided through the institute. The question, Messer says, is, “How do we become a growth-oriented system and help our professional learning get better and better?”

The district’s work with the standards will also guide those educators working to make the professional learning tool as useful for teachers as possible.

“We’re really excited about the standards because they will bring common language and common expectations around professional learning to our district,” says Lisa Summitt, an instructional specialist with Jefferson County. She adds that her team is especially focusing on one aspect of the Resources standard, which states: “Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires prioritizing, monitoring, and coordinating resources for educator learning.”

“Since a good portion of our work on the professional learning module in the dashboard is finding and vetting excellent resources for teachers in order to constantly improve in the classroom,” she says, “we will use this standard to drive our work this coming year.”

Going forward, Messer says the challenge will be how to again spread understanding and ownership of the standards across schools. “If you go too big, you don’t get deep, you get compliance,” she says. “There’s not enough buy-in.”

Mary Beth Bazzanella, director of educational technology for the district, calls the dashboard “a foundational tool that complements the entire teaching-learning cycle.” She adds that she’s encouraged by the attention cabinet-level officials in the district are giving to professional learning. “We’re pushing into the classroom,” she says, “but we’re also pushing up to the district level.”

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**Linda Jacobson (lrj417@yahoo.com) is an education writer and editor. ■**

*Continued from p. 17*

In gathering input from various audiences on the guide, Carroll says the Cycle of Inquiry (see box on p. 17) used by Redesign PD Community of Practice districts has kept her team on track.

### LEARNING THAT HELPS TEACHERS MAKE PROGRESS

In the Shelby County district, professional learning is considered a key component of reaching goals that the district has identified as Destination 2025. Teachers “want to be a key lever in achieving those goals,” says Kori Hamner, director of support and professional development. But she adds that, because the people on her team can’t facilitate all of the professional learning across the district, they needed a way to make sure that what was being offered was meeting certain expectations.

“It has to really help teachers make the progress that we need to see in our students,” she says.

Her team has created design principles to guide professional learning and drafted a presentation rubric in order to gather feedback in response to those principles. All sessions are also now expected to have “kudos” — which stands for what teachers are supposed to “know, understand, and do” after they participate in the learning. So far, the principles and the expectations have primarily been applied to the sessions offered as part of the three district learning days held during the year.

The Loudon County team began the process of developing its rubric by surveying teachers in a focus group about their professional learning experiences. The teachers represented a variety of content areas and levels in order to provide good data. Warren says they knew teachers were experiencing high-quality learning if they gave good marks on the survey.

Principals will also be able to use the overall template that has now been created and adapt it for professional learning at their local schools. Warren adds that the rubric has already been helpful in guiding professional learning related to Response to Intervention. After seeking input from a broad array of educators — including school psychologists, special education teachers, general education teachers, and other players — Warren says her team was able to streamline professional learning to make it better meet their needs. “We were trying to put a Band-Aid on certain things and not covering things in depth,” Warren says. She adds that the process “helped us to listen to what the teachers were really looking for.”

### ONGOING CHALLENGES

Even with the criteria, Carroll says getting each of Bridgeport’s schools to focus on priority areas for professional learning, in the midst of other demands, will still be a challenge. But she adds that she’s encouraged by the reaction from staff developers across the district. “They appreciated seeing the big picture and how it’s all connected,” she says.

**“We are building a process to really have the district improvement plan drive the focus of the work and ultimately develop a few key priorities for schools to work on.”**

— *Terry Carroll,*  
assistant superintendent  
of instruction for  
Bridgeport schools.



In Loudon County, Garren says he expects to face typical challenges in getting principals to use the rubric. “There are some principals who will see our vision and others who think there is another hoop to jump through,” he says, but adds that he is trying to lead by example in bringing professional learning to the local level. “I think they will start to see the message because we are actually doing what we’re asking them to do.”

Finally, in Shelby County, Hamner says that, while those providing professional learning are beginning to identify meaningful follow-up support, the next step is to make sure there is a way to measure whether that is actually taking place. For example, with 400 math teachers in the district, there is no way someone who provides professional learning in math can observe all of those teachers, she says.


“We know we have some work to do to make sure that it’s feasible and that it really is a way to measure what we did want teachers to be able to do,” she says. She added that in response to some initial feedback, the district has created a fellowship program in which 100 teachers will learn how to lead professional learning in literacy and math and engage in their own learning about effective adult learning strategies.

Another challenge, she added, is getting other district departments that provide professional learning to plan sessions with the principles in mind, even if that means narrowing down the number of options available. The district has had a culture of providing teachers as many learning choices as possible, but Hamner says all that choice might not help the district reach its goals.

“We have to be strategic,” she says, “and say, ‘What aligns to our outcomes and what learning do people need?’”

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**Linda Jacobson (lrj417@yahoo.com) is an education writer and editor. ■**

# NEIGHBORS MAKE GREAT LEARNING PARTNERS



4 TEXAS  
DISTRICTS  
WORK  
TOGETHER TO  
BUILD STRONG  
PROFESSIONAL  
LEARNING  
SYSTEMS





**By Kay Psencik, Steven Ebell,  
and Lisa V. McCulley**

**W**hen school district leaders attend instructional sessions about professional learning, they might take

away a few ideas and strategies they want to try. But when experts provide those districts with ongoing coaching, the educators are more likely to gain the ability to create strong professional learning systems that benefit all educators.

That's the shift taking place in four southeast Texas school districts working as part of a three-year initiative to improve professional learning in their districts. Clear Creek Independent School District, Friendswood Independent School District, Santa Fe Independent School District, and Galveston Independent School District — all in Galveston County — became part of Galveston County Learning Leaders in spring 2015 when Learning Forward launched the project with a grant from the Houston Endowment.

The community is based on the concept that districts benefit when they can share knowledge with each other. Learning Forward also wanted to partner with the districts to identify some exemplary systems that can inspire similar work in more districts across the country.

Each district created a team that includes both central office and local school administrators. As part of the initiative, the teams receive membership to Learning Forward, access to Learning Exchange (Learning Forward's online

**COMMUNITY'S WORK NETS  
HIGH-QUALITY RESULTS**

**A**fter developing a problem of practice, participants created a KASAB (knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations, behaviors — see table below) around their problem of practice. Teams then developed a theory of change and logic model.

Early on, the leadership team simply complied with the requests to complete these processes. Once they finished

and reflected on the conversations, participants recognized the power of these protocols.

This initial work was done as a community of learners, in which each team shared results with the other school district teams. This sharing and feedback from colleagues proved powerful and helped participants refine their work to a higher quality than would have been possible by working in isolation — the very definition of a community of practice.

**KASAB**

	<b>KNOWLEDGE</b>	<b>ATTITUDES</b>	<b>SKILLS</b>	<b>ASPIRATIONS</b>	<b>BEHAVIORS</b>
<b>TEACHERS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The what and why of professional learning communities (PLCs).</li> <li>• Awareness of professional learning and how the district defines it.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Value reflection.</li> <li>• Collaboration is essential.</li> <li>• Risk-taking is encouraged.</li> <li>• Value feedback.</li> <li>• Build efficacy with students.</li> <li>• Each child can learn at a profound level.</li> <li>• Commitment to work.</li> <li>• Professional learning is an obligation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration.</li> <li>• Open-minded.</li> <li>• Relationship skills.</li> <li>• Reflective.</li> <li>• Data analysis.</li> <li>• Research.</li> <li>• Goal-setting.</li> <li>• Persistence.</li> <li>• Give feedback to colleagues.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning every day.</li> <li>• Commitment to work.</li> <li>• Impact students.</li> <li>• Growth mindset.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active participation in professional learning.</li> <li>• Ownership in planning.</li> <li>• Autonomy.</li> <li>• Positive conversations.</li> <li>• Leadership.</li> <li>• Excited.</li> </ul>
<b>PRINCIPALS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Needs of staff.</li> <li>• Awareness of culture and how to influence.</li> <li>• PLCs.</li> <li>• Campus student performance goals.</li> <li>• Structures.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support.</li> <li>• Positive presupposition in students and teachers.</li> <li>• Risk-taking.</li> <li>• Open to feedback.</li> <li>• Work is never done.</li> <li>• Professional learning is an obligation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give feedback well.</li> <li>• Building effective teams.</li> <li>• Communicate vision and value of professional learning.</li> <li>• Hiring.</li> <li>• Meeting professional learning needs of all experience levels.</li> <li>• Data analysis.</li> <li>• Mediating conflict.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning every day.</li> <li>• Building teacher capacity.</li> <li>• Commitment to work.</li> <li>• Build teacher leadership.</li> <li>• Learning together.</li> <li>• Cycle of continuous improvement.</li> <li>• Student learning impacted by PLC.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fully engaged.</li> <li>• Learning every day.</li> <li>• Building strong teams.</li> <li>• Excited.</li> </ul>
<b>DISTRICT LEADERS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• District student performance goals.</li> <li>• Understand PLC.</li> <li>• Adult learning theory.</li> <li>• Staff needs.</li> <li>• Access to research.</li> <li>• Good models.</li> <li>• Principals and campuses.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support.</li> <li>• Working alongside.</li> <li>• Solution-oriented.</li> <li>• Commitment and persistence.</li> <li>• Professional learning is an obligation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing support systems.</li> <li>• Design and facilitate professional learning and PLCs.</li> <li>• Support professional learning designs.</li> <li>• Sustain change.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning every day.</li> <li>• Learning system.</li> <li>• Model continuous learning.</li> <li>• Model positive nonconformity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic abandonment.</li> <li>• Provide resources (money, time) based on needs.</li> <li>• Shares moral purpose.</li> <li>• Collaborative.</li> <li>• Excited.</li> </ul>

community), financial support from the Houston Endowment, and ongoing feedback from Resources for Learning, an Austin, Texas-based organization that is evaluating the effort.

One of the primary goals of Galveston County Learning Leaders is to develop a community of practice among these districts that will be sustained long after the grant is over in 2018. That means that they value the time they share with each other — both in person and through Learning Exchange. The coaching initiative is also designed to help district leaders gain the skills to sustain a strong professional learning system and for principals to implement the system at the local school level.

“Before, professional learning was like a patchwork quilt,” one team member wrote following a coaching session. “Having a systemic process and a common vocabulary makes a big difference.”

Each district team brought to the community a problem of practice they wanted to address as part of their journey toward developing a strong professional learning system. Over time, they are refining the problems they want to address with the assistance of their coach and designing systems that engage district leaders and school learning communities in a cycle of continuous improvement.

For several months, the Friendswood team, for example, would meet to decide on the areas they needed to improve, but they weren’t having much luck, says Superintendent Trish Hanks. Working with a coach helped the team identify more precisely the problem they wanted to solve.

“Our coaches helped us to solidify our vision of professional development, which led to better defining our problem of practice through the questions they asked us and the research they provided,” Hanks says. “That was a huge step for our group, and our coaches definitely helped our team’s movement.”

## GRADUAL RELEASE

In the first year of the project, the whole group met several times, but, in keeping with the coaching approach, those days have been gradually reduced so that the teams can have more time to work with their coach and with each other.

As part of the project, the districts have administered the Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI) to instructional staff members at their schools. The SAI, a 50-item, online survey, helps districts see how closely their professional learning system matches Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011), and the coaches have spent a significant amount of their time helping the district teams delve into and understand their SAI results.

“Working with a coach drills down to what you are doing, where your needs are, and how you can continue to grow,” says Leigh Wall, Santa Fe’s superintendent. “It becomes very meaningful, specific, and direct.”

She says that while her district has always prioritized profes-

sional learning and provided plenty of high-quality learning opportunities for teachers, the leadership team learned that there was still some fragmentation and that not all teachers were seeing the connections between what they were learning and how they could use it in the classroom to benefit students.

Because Santa Fe had experienced some turnover among principals, the time seemed right to focus on creating a more cohesive system of professional learning and give school leaders a wider perspective of what happens at the district level, adds Jackie Shuman, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction.

On professional learning days built into the school calendar, or in their professional learning communities, the Santa Fe principals began to devote time to building a deeper understanding of professional learning among teachers. Administrators worked on creating common beliefs and vocabulary about professional learning. The next step, Wall says, is to create some common expectations for professional learning communities.

## GAINING UNDERSTANDING OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

When Clear Creek leaders first learned about the opportunity to join Galveston County Learning Leaders, they felt that the goals of the community closely matched what they were trying to achieve as part of a new strategic plan they developed in 2013.

“The children in our school district deserve the very best, and we give them our best when we, as adults, commit to continuous learning for the sake of the success of our children,” says Superintendent Greg Smith.

The district had a professional learning plan, but decided as part of Galveston County Learning Leaders to focus on making sure the plan was closely followed at the school and teacher level. To do this, the leaders realized that professional learning communities (PLCs) needed to become more familiar with the Standards for Professional Learning. The challenge was finding time for them to do that.

They saw a monthly leadership meeting following school board meetings as a prime opportunity to give leaders time to focus on improving professional learning. Normally, principals and other leaders would spend that meeting reviewing school board actions. But they decided to take a flipped learning approach and move much of the board’s material to the district’s online learning management system. This change allowed the principals and department leaders to spend the time sharing and reflecting on the sections they were assigned to read in *Becoming a Learning System* (Hirsh, Psencik, & Brown, 2014).

## EVALUATING PROGRESS

Resources for Learning is collecting evidence to determine how participating in the community is benefitting the district

**“Before, professional learning was like a patchwork quilt,” wrote one team member.**

## PRINCIPALS JOIN THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

After working together for 1½ years, Galveston County Learning Leaders superintendents extended the work to principals in their districts by engaging principals in an institute on effective professional learning. Although district leadership teams shared what they were learning with principals in their districts and facilitated sessions to develop new skills in leading professional learning, they believed an institute would boost their work. Because the group’s problem of practice focuses on developing district professional learning plans that positively impact the skills of principals to engage teachers in standards-driven professional learning at their schools, this request seemed like a natural extension of the work.

Together, superintendents and coaches crafted a curriculum for the institute that focuses on engaging everyone in the cycle of continuous improvement, using the Standards for Professional Learning to design effective professional learning for teams of teachers, change theory, giving precise feedback, and coaching for success. Principals engaged in



authentic learning with collaborative teams around a common issue and worked together to apply the precise professional learning deemed necessary to propel change at their school.

Here is what we’ve learned:

- Combining intensive professional learning for district leaders who then organize principals in communities of learners is essential to building a learning system in a district.
- Principals learning together around a problem of practice focused on their district’s goals accelerate

learning of all and facilitate the implementation of district initiatives.

- District leadership teams working side by side with principal learning communities keep all focused on the primary learning expected of all.
- When principals learn from each other, equity develops across the district.

Responses from participants in the principals institute have been promising. Data taken from principals attending the institute strongly suggest that they perceive considerable benefit from their participation. While some described the rigor of the content as “challenging,” the vast majority noted the value of the learning experience.

Principals overwhelmingly expressed an appreciation for the time to collaborate with colleagues from their own district as well as an opportunity to form relationships with principals from other districts. One participant said, “We experienced better clarification of the process and had ample opportunity to digest, reflect, and utilize the new information. Thanks for the specific examples!”

teams and leading to change in their schools. Evaluators are analyzing multiple forms of data, such as surveys, participants’ feedback on the joint meetings, and documents produced by the districts as part of their work.

At this point in their work, district teams are “moving beyond acquisition of new knowledge and skills by applying the processes and protocols to their work,” according to the evaluators. “District teams are considering ways to transfer and scale their new learning to their colleagues throughout their systems.”

Both in person and virtually, the networking “within and across systems has been robust,” they say. The team members use Learning Exchange to share tools, ideas, and resources as well as to pose problems and offer each other solutions.

Beliefs and strategies related to professional learning are not the only things these four districts have in common, says

Stephanie Hirsh, Learning Forward’s executive director. Because they are geographically close, they face many of the same circumstances, challenges, and, often, students — a factor that strengthens their work as a community.

“There is increased uptake from new insights and better practices. Change spreads faster within districts as well as from school system to school system,” she says. “The superintendents understand that families in one school system may next year be families in their school system. As a result, student progress is monitored and celebrated not only by the individual school system but by the entire county.”

## LESSONS LEARNED

After more than a year of work with the districts, Learning Forward is taking away some lessons that can benefit other

organizations providing technical assistance and other districts participating in communities of practice.

- **Coaching can lead district teams to follow through with important steps that they might not have taken the time for if they only listened to a presentation on the topic.** For example, the districts were introduced to the KASAB model, which refers to the knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations, and behaviors that adults develop through a formal learning process.

“At first, I could not understand what we were doing or why,” one of the team leaders says. “The processes of developing a KASAB, determining a theory of change and logic model seemed a big waste of time. That is not true today! These strategies are essential to us in this district to initiate work on any innovation we might be considering in the future and for sure the processes we are involved in today.”

- **It’s important up front to develop a common understanding among districts about coaching and about identifying a problem of practice.** Districts might be eager to participate in such a community but might not really know what they are getting into.
- **Coaching matters.** While the whole-group sessions allow the districts to learn from each other, it’s the precise feedback and support from coaches that helps district teams follow through with addressing their problem of practice and reaching their goals.
- **A long-term approach is essential for teams to internalize the shifts in their practices that engage all in their district in effective professional learning.** The structure provides room for large-group meetings, individual coaching sessions, time to try new strategies, opportunities to share what districts are learning with the larger community, and opportunities to make adjustments. Over time, the district teams become clear about what they are learning.
- **Leadership involvement makes a difference.** District leadership teams are powerful in accelerating the understanding of professional learning of everyone in the organization — especially when the superintendent is leading the process. “We will never go back to hosting meetings with district leaders as we have in the past,” one of the superintendents said. “We have learned that when we involve all our district administrators in learning conversations, everyone is engaged and focused on the work. They sense their ideas are valued.”
- **On a related note, principals are key to any successful effort.** When they serve on the district leadership team, they quickly become models for others and are most effective in leading their peers. Principals accelerate the implementation of any dream or aspiration of the district when they are a part of the process and deeply understand what and why the work is essential.
- **Invest in building relationships.** The district leadership teams have become a community of learners and have

grown to develop collective responsibility for the success of this effort as well as the success of many other innovations in their district.

“As we do similar work, (Clear Creek) leaders often see colleagues from the other school districts at various events and functions, but GCLL (Galveston County Learning Leaders) has provided a purposeful forum for all teams to share their work, offer feedback, and learn from each other,” says Steven Ebell, Clear Creek’s deputy superintendent for curriculum and instruction. “This experience has helped to build much stronger relationships than previously existed. Additionally, the close work with our coach has built trusting relationships and caused the leadership team to seek her expertise for many more issues beyond the scope of the GCLL work.”

- **Search for common ground.** While each district has unique needs and strengths, it’s useful if there are some common elements to the problems or issues that they are trying to address. “If you start on some common ground, the community will be more secure with each other and more helpful to each other,” says Lisa McCulley, director of evaluation at Resources for Learning.
- **Districts that take full advantage of the coaching available to them make progress quicker compared to those who wait for the coach to check in.**

This is true even in larger districts. Over the next year, the emphasis on coaching will continue to increase.

“District coaching is a great asset,” said one superintendent who has clearly seen the impact of the coach’s work. “It is great to have proactive conversations about purposeful, professional learning. We would like to have her all to ourselves. We would use her time effectively and efficiently here.”

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**Kay Psencik (kay.psencik@learningforward.org) is a Learning Forward senior consultant. Steven Ebell (sebell@ccisd.net) is deputy superintendent at Clear Creek Independent School District. Lisa V. McCulley (lisam@resourcesforlearning.com) is director of evaluation at Resources for Learning. ■**

**While the whole-group sessions allow the districts to learn from each other, it’s the precise feedback and support from the coaches that helps the district teams to follow through with addressing their problem of practice and reaching their goals.**



# CREATIVE TENSION

TURN THE CHALLENGES OF LEARNING TOGETHER INTO OPPORTUNITIES

By Christina L. Dobbs, Jacy Ippolito, and Megin Charner-Laird

**E**ffective and authentic communities of practice in schools have the potential to support teachers in improving their instructional practices around perennial challenges, such as improving the literacy skills of all students. But before they can achieve such goals, communities of practice take time to build, effort to sustain, and ongoing support to spread their work.

Because a strong community of practice is often situated within a broader department or school context, an ecosystem within an ecosystem, nurturing that community requires a delicate balance of supports and structures if it is going to lead to real instructional change.

Our work in an ongoing disciplinary literacy professional learning initiative has taught us that the formation of communities of practice for teachers relies on finding

the right balance of elements that both support such communities and also free teachers to pursue authentic work related to their own classrooms.

While this just-right balance is often built through trial and error, and necessarily changes over time, it is an essential element of a productive community of practice. Moreover, we believe that there are several broad tensions that could be instructive to new communities of practice as they design their own professional learning trajectories.

These communities of practice were formed as part of the Content-area Reading Initiative at Brookline High School in Brookline, Massachusetts, a large and diverse comprehensive high school. Brookline High School has more than 140 teachers, who serve over 1,700 students representing 76 nations and speaking 57 languages. Roughly a third of students are English language learners, and a growing number of students receive free or reduced



lunch or special education services.

The Content-area Reading Initiative, designed partly in response to shifting student demographics, is a four-year project using teacher professional learning communities to improve students' literacy skills in various secondary content areas. The initiative relied on a variety of structural supports and components to form and support departmental and cross-departmental communities of practice focused on literacy teaching and learning.

For the teacher teams involved, finding the right balance between complex factors in the broader school and modifying traditional ways of engaging in professional development made all the difference in spurring changes in teacher practice and student learning. Yet arriving at those changes was not easy or straightforward.

Here are some of the key tensions that emerged throughout the project and that members of communities of practice navigated to work and learn together effectively. While we caution that not all communities of practice will encounter these same tensions, we believe that considering the various factors that shaped particular communities of practice work within a particular ecosystem can help others consider the tensions that might arise in their context.

### DEFINING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

We define communities of practice using Wenger's (1998) work. He describes a community of practice as a community of individuals mutually engaged in a joint enterprise that will lead to repertoires of resources and tools that can be used by its participants (Wenger, 1998). These

### THE BENEFITS OF COLLECTIVE LEARNING

**F**or teachers in the Content-area Reading Initiative, weekly work in disciplinary teams — which developed into communities of practice — was the key component that supported shared learning over the course of the initiative. For them, this is where the nitty-gritty, as some put it, of their learning and improvement took place.

For instance, the science team came together to figure out how to help students gain more facility reading and interpreting diagrams in science texts. Similarly, the math team worked collectively to find and frame readings that could be integrated into mathematics lessons. The success of these development processes was clearly dependent on the group as a whole.

Across different disciplinary teams, teachers spoke of the “wisdom” gained from colleagues and about how “the sum of everybody is greater than its parts.” In reflecting on the growth and learning that emerged from the disciplinary communities of practice, one teacher captured the benefits of this collective learning process: “Wise colleagues focused consistently on literacy. It shouldn't be rare, but it is!”

communities are often marked by high levels of engagement around a goal developed and shared by teachers.

In the Content-area Reading Initiative, participants grappled with and attempted new instructional practices designed to improve students' literacy skills over time. Without regular opportunities to interact around the work of improving literacy, teachers might have found ideas for improving literacy instruction in their individual classrooms, but they might not have come to agreement on new, shared instructional routines. Moreover, the strength of the collective work allowed the teams to then spread their practices to colleagues outside the project.

### PROJECT CONTEXT

As we have written about before in *JSD* and elsewhere (Ippolito, Dobbs, & Charner-Laird, 2014; Dobbs, Ippolito, & Charner-Laird, 2016), the project at Brookline

High School was co-designed by a team of school-based teachers and leaders in consultation with us as university partners. Major features of the four-year project included:

- Two two-year cycles of professional learning;
- Three teacher teams engaged in each two-year cycle (English, social studies, world languages, math, science, and special education teams);
- Teams composed of six content-area teachers, specialists, or librarians;
- One team leader elected by each team to facilitate meetings;
- Weekly team meetings over the course of each two-year cycle;
- Annual summer professional learning, led by university partners, ranging from two days to one week; and
- Quarterly “days away” during the academic year where all three teams from each cycle converged to share new learning.

Here we focus on how these teams functioned as communities of practice and navigated learning together and using new approaches to instruction.

### TENSION 1:

#### BALANCING AUTONOMY AND SUPPORT FROM LEADERSHIP

The support of school leadership was key to building effective communities of practice. Establishing authentic communities of practice around disciplinary literacy required support from administrators at multiple levels.

A team of teachers, leaders, and we, as university consultants, met over several months to determine how to structure the initiative. Throughout the project, principals, department chairs, and other school and district leaders encouraged the work and supported it by protecting team meeting times, purchasing materials when requested, and asking teams to share their work with broader departments.

It is important to note that sanctioned school leaders did not lead the teams’ work, and school leaders did not push teams to pursue particular agendas or come to certain conclusions. Participants had autonomy to try different instructional practices and make decisions about the utility and effectiveness of those practices. If leadership had dictated the improvement agenda—for instance, mandating that the history team develop assessments of students’ comprehension of key historical texts as opposed to allowing a focus such as this one to emerge organically from within the team—it is unlikely that individuals and communities of practice would have had the same agency in the process of inventing and adapting new practices.

This true ownership of the work, with arms-length support from administrators, was essential to success in the project. The notion of supported autonomy was key to developing the mutual engagement that is described in Wenger’s (1998) definition of a community of practice, facilitating sincere effort on the part of all members to work toward a shared group interest—in this case, disciplinary literacy.

### TENSION 2:

#### BALANCING PROCESS AND PRODUCT

The teams quickly learned that they needed to strike a balance between focusing on products—instructional plans, units, assessments—and the process of learning to work together as communities of practice.

Each team had participants with very different orientations toward the work. Some individuals focused intensely on action, while others focused more on planning. Some participants placed a great deal of attention on considering how the group was getting along, while others were concerned about the efficiency of weekly meetings and whether time was being used well.

For each team’s community of practice to function smoothly, team leaders had to find the right balance between process and products over time. Sometimes this meant that a team needed to ensure the creation of a product for participants to use in the classroom or synthesize their thinking, such as building a website with materials they made or charting all of the vocabulary strategies a team had done.

At other times, the focus needed to shift more to process, with teams spending time learning to use new discussion protocols, finding ways to reflect on group dynamics, determining how they might engage all members in setting meeting agendas, or figuring out when to move from one inquiry cycle to another.

In fairly traditional high schools, like Brookline High, teachers often work independently. Therefore, the process of learning how to work and learn together was essential to moving from a group of individuals focused on similar topics to becoming communities of practice that negotiated careful ways to work together around shared questions.

### TENSION 3:

#### BALANCING OUTSIDE EXPERTISE AND TIME TO FOCUS ON OUR OWN WORK

Though traditional professional development often relies on a single format or approach, this project incorporated multiple learning modalities. At key points, university partners with expertise in professional development and literacy in the disciplines offered sessions on strategies and approaches to integrating literacy into content-area instruction. While more of this guidance happened early on in each two-year cycle, teachers’ dominant form of learning was through the collaborative work carried out in disciplinary teams, where they developed their own inquiry cycles and decided the topics for those cycles.

Though there were key instances in which university partners helped to parse relevant research and share key strategies from the field—such as in the domain of vocabulary instruction—ultimately, this learning took root due to the work that teachers carried out together around each topic. Because the teams controlled their learning, made choices about it, and worked independently, they were able to take ownership of the



work and extend it into their classrooms.

Teachers noted the power of balance between external expertise and teacher-driven learning, with a number mentioning the importance of the “academic” content shared by consultants, which they could digest and enact in collaboration with disciplinary colleagues. Without plenty of time for teachers to focus on learning about new practices, digest expert guidance, look at student work to discern patterns, and design new tasks and lessons, the initiative might have felt as though it was yet another top-down or expert-driven professional development mandate.

#### TENSION 4:

##### BALANCING INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP GOALS

Content-area teams in the project were conducting inquiry cycles into their own practice based on their own students’ classroom performance. This meant that, at times, team members were interested in different questions. Keeping everyone involved in the work of each community of practice meant finding ways to work together as a group while balancing these individual needs. At times, teams could identify a project that would allow them to address a broad question that then allowed for individuals to tailor the inquiry to their own needs and questions.

While some inquiries engaged everyone in a broad topic — with individual personalization as needed — other inquiry cycles created more of a challenge, as team members hoped to branch out in a number of different directions. When members of the English language arts team found themselves torn between focusing on independent reading structures and conducting reading assessment conferences, they decided to work with both topics. Group members shared their individual progress and takeaways on the two different topics with the full group.

This approach allowed team members to follow their interests and still learn from the group at the same time. By balancing individual needs and group needs, the teams were able to structure their work together in order to ensure that participants were able to stay engaged but also behave as cohesive groups when needed.

#### TENSION 5:

##### BALANCING REFLECTION AND DISSEMINATION

As the project unfolded over four years, we learned that there were different ideas about completing work effectively, and this, too, required balance from participants. Some group members would not have felt they had done their work well without stopping periodically to reflect on how their classrooms had changed. While some prized reflection sessions, others were less enthusiastic about spending time on reflection and wanted to get right back to making materials for classroom use and spreading those materials to teachers outside the project.

As each team’s cycle of participation in the project came to a close, each came to several questions about how to conclude

all that they had done. They considered which instructional practices they wanted to keep, which they wanted to encourage others in their departments to try, and which larger stories of learning they wanted to reflect their two years’ of work.

Some teams decided to present their work to their departments or colleagues at local middle schools, while others built websites or presented at local content-specific conferences (e.g. the Massachusetts Reading Association conference, the Massachusetts Foreign Language Association conference). Still others had to find ways to continue implementing projects such as assessments that had been developed during their work together.

This move from inventing to reflecting happened differently for each team, but each had to go through the process of figuring out how to synthesize the work they had done and make determinations about what was worth holding onto and sharing with others.

##### DISRUPTING CULTURES OF ISOLATION

In our experience with the project at Brookline High, we found communities of practice to be powerful tools for improving disciplinary literacy instruction and disrupting the traditionally isolating cultures of secondary schools. Before the initiative, these communities did not exist. They had to be carefully constructed.

To build these communities inside the broader school, we and project participants had to find ways to balance tensions and competing interests within teams, within the project as a whole, and within the ecosystem of the larger school.

Navigating these types of tensions is an inevitable part of building communities of practice — and one that simultaneously serves to strengthen those communities. Such work results in the type of deep collaboration and conversation needed to improve instruction and sustain momentum for improvement.

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**Christina L. Dobbs (cdobbs@bu.edu) is an assistant professor at Boston University. Jacy Ippolito (jacy.ippolito@salemstate.edu) is an associate professor and Megin Charner-Laird (mcharnerlaird@salemstate.edu) is an assistant professor at Salem State University in Salem, Massachusetts. ■**



# CORE PRACTICES FUEL SUPERINTENDENTS' EQUITY FOCUS

By Scott Thompson

**F**or 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.

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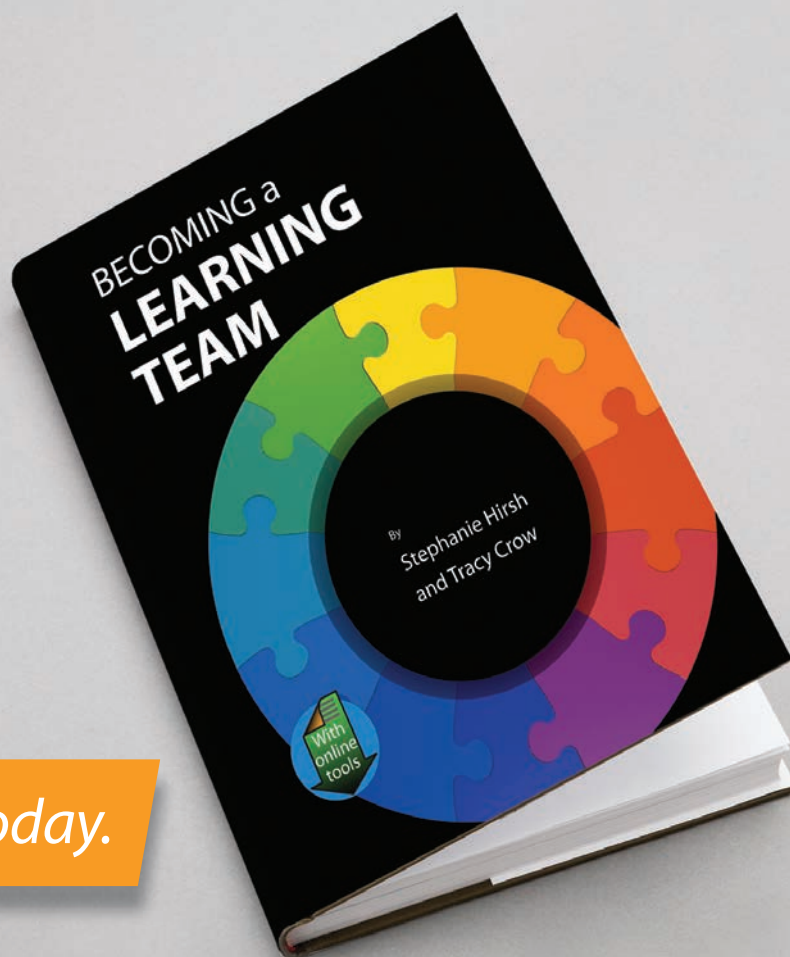
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**Scott Thompson (sthompson@foundation.us.panasonic.com) is assistant executive director of the Panasonic Foundation. ■**

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by *Stephanie Hirsh  
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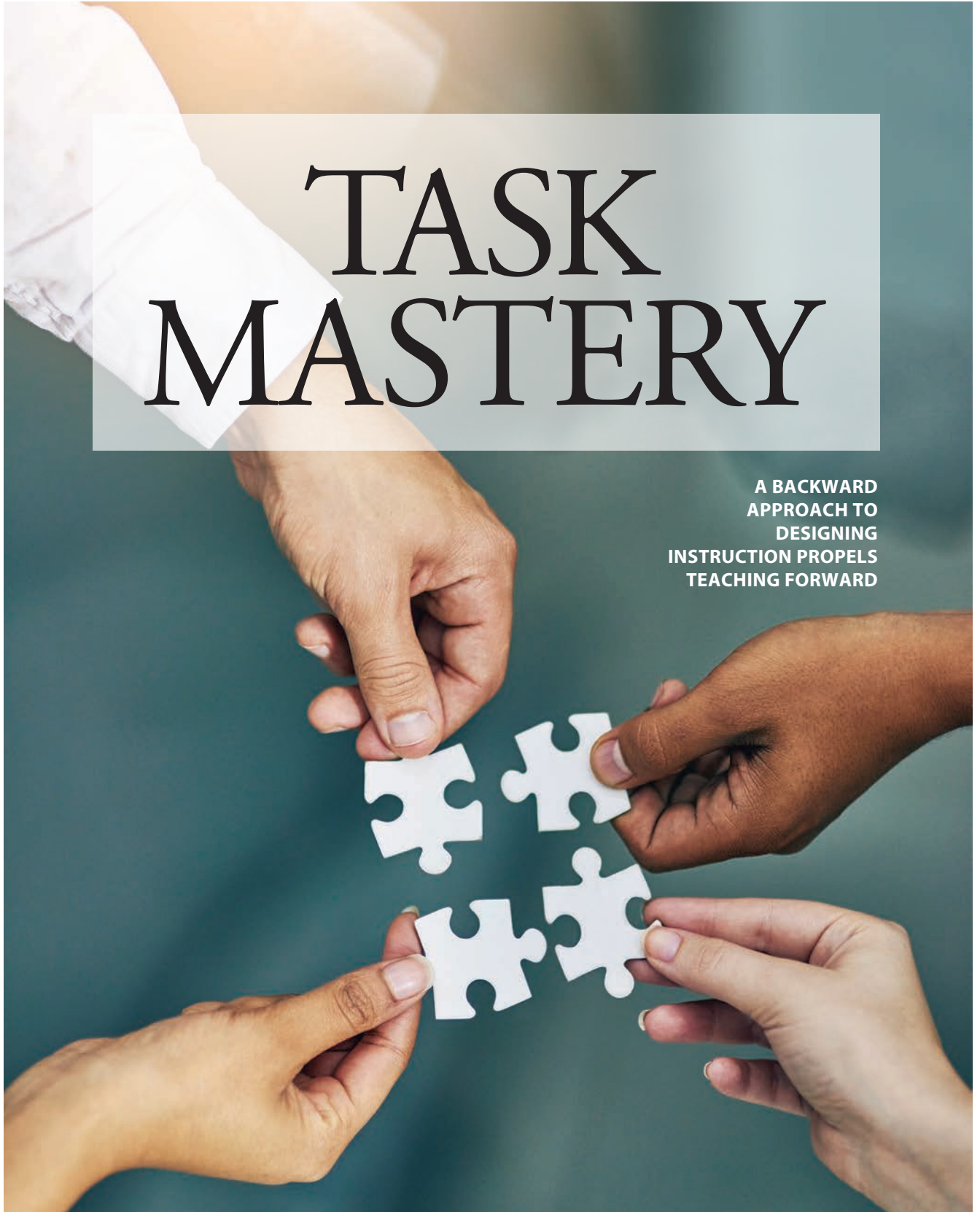
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# TASK MASTERY

A BACKWARD  
APPROACH TO  
DESIGNING  
INSTRUCTION PROPELS  
TEACHING FORWARD





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## By Suzanne Simons

*“It’s a completely different mind shift. Before, we were planning in isolation. When we did get together for common planning, I wasn’t evaluating the standards for student mastery, common misconceptions, or instructional implications. If I did, it was hit or miss. It wasn’t a consistent way of thinking and acting, as it is now. Now, we are continually looking at student work, planning based on their needs, adapting instruction, and putting better assignments in front of students. I’m learning from my peers and contributing to better outcomes for everyone involved. It’s truly an empowering experience when teachers are invested.”*

— Tiffany Scott, accelerated resource teacher,  
Mount Dora Middle School, Lake County Schools, Florida

**F**or more than 20 years, education research has pointed to what Lake County teacher Tiffany Scott is experiencing firsthand: Collaboration holds promise for improving teaching and learning. Of course, research also shows that collaboration is a means, not an end.

In *Creating Instructional Capacity*, Joseph Murphy (2016) warns that collaboration in and of itself is not inherently effective (Levine & Marcus, 2010; Penuel, Sussex, Korbak, & Hoadley, 2006). Teachers working together must be organized and supported based on the preponderance of research that shows, in Murphy’s words, how “collective work done well can accelerate their learning and the achievement of their students.”

Ben Jensen furthers this finding in *Beyond PD: Teacher Professional Learning in High-Performing Systems*, noting that the largely effective education systems of British Columbia, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Singapore focus on teacher learning to impact student learning (Jensen, Sonnemann, Roberts-Hull, & Hunter, 2016).

We are now seeing examples of these types of strong teacher communities of practice emerging closer to home. From Thompson School District bordering the mountains of Northern Colorado, to Lake County Schools on the outskirts of the Florida wetlands, to the urban school districts of New York City and Los Angeles, teachers are working with the Literacy Design Collaborative to develop collabora-

tive practices that support their professional growth and students’ learning.

Literacy Design Collaborative is a network of teachers committed to developing literacy-rich instruction in the content areas and building expertise from teacher to teacher. Drawing on research of adult learning and leveraging new technologies, Literacy Design Collaborative provides the design system, tools, and supports to power effective teacher collaboration and conversations on teacher practice and student learning.

### CREATING AND IMPLEMENTING QUALITY LITERACY-RICH ASSIGNMENTS

The research is clear that teacher professional development is most effective when it focuses on the subject matter teachers teach (Borko, 2004) and on resources that teachers can use immediately with students (Owen, 2003), such as assignments and daily lessons.

Moreover, in *Instructional Rounds in Education*, Richard Elmore (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009) proffers that quality assignments have such an impact on student performance that, more than any other factor in the classroom, “the task predicts performance.”

Within the Literacy Design Collaborative instructional design system, therefore, the task is the anchor for teacher work and student work. Co-designed with teachers, the system guides teachers in a backward design approach that helps teachers create tasks and, from there, strong instructional plans to teach the tasks.

An online learning and collaboration platform called LDC CoreTools provides a space in which teachers can collaboratively create, share, and adapt free, high-quality, literacy-rich assignments. These range from modules (larger “writing-based-on-reading” tasks with sequenced instructional plan taught over one to three weeks) to minitasks (10- to 40-minute lessons focused on particular literacy skills).

While the tools can be used by one teacher who is planning alone, teachers are finding that the tools support collaboration in ways that make the tasks and instructional plans stronger and teacher collaboration real and relevant.

For example, the tools include a curriculum alignment rubric and a peer review system developed by the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity. The rubric and peer review system provide teachers with a lens to

evaluate collaboratively their own tasks and instructional plans for clarity, rigor, and relevance.

As such, the tools depersonalize professional conversations so that teachers can safely challenge and support each other. Ultimately, the tools help to center team conversations around instruction: What are we asking students to do through our tasks, how do we plan to teach them, and what is the evidence of student learning?

In the Thompson School District, for example, teachers are collaboratively designing units that include common Literacy Design Collaborative tasks that they all agree to teach. According to Carmen Williams, Thompson’s director of assessment and professional learning, “Professional learning community time is really starting to shift. We’re not just talking about logistics and individual students, but we’re coming together to design quality tasks and looking at and sharing instructional strategies for teaching those tasks.”

After two years of this work, there is emerging evidence that teacher collaboration around common tasks is having a positive impact on student learning. Thompson’s data from the 2015 PARCC-aligned state assessments shows that 41% of 10th graders who were taught via the common tasks and minitasks met or exceeded the English language arts standards. In comparison, 28% of 10th graders who were not taught via the common tasks and minitasks met or exceeded the English language arts standards.

### LOOKING AT STUDENT WORK

The educators we work with emphasize the importance of having access to tools that support teacher conversations about student work. They echo the research that posits that the most effective professional learning is inquiry-based (Franke, Carpenter, Levi, & Fennema, 2001; Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007). As Joseph Murphy (2016) sums up in *Creating Instructional Capacity*, “Productive inquiry in professional communities of practice is analytic, dynamic, continuous, and constructivist in nature.”

That’s exactly the type of work the Literacy Design Collaborative system is supporting. We are finding that teachers are using the minitasks as the locus of conversations about student work and instructional choices. Each minitask seeks to develop a specific skill, requires a student product, includes a scoring guide, and outlines example instructional strategies. It’s the perfect “bite-sized” formative assessment for teacher inquiry.

Here’s one example: In Florida’s Lake County Schools, teacher teams are using Literacy Design Collaborative minitasks as the focus of their lesson study. Their lesson cycle includes: Plan the minitask (as mentioned above), teach it, analyze the results, and apply lessons learned.

After looking at student work using the minitask’s scoring guide, teachers analyze their results together to identify the levels of skill development and determine which students need

which type of instruction going forward. According to Mary Ellen Barger, personalized learning facilitator and former English language arts teacher at Windy Hill Middle School, this type of inquiry work requires a learning curve for all involved, but it’s worth it.

“When we first asked teachers to come to the learning team with sample papers, we asked for samples that were high, medium, and low,” Barger said. “In actuality, what we saw was high-high, high, and high-medium [work]. Teachers were scared they were going to be judged and evaluated. So we used that opportunity to help teachers dig deeper into what they saw in those papers. And then, next time, we had them bring back all of their papers. From there, teachers are now becoming great collaborators, really digging into conversations with each other about how they taught a certain skill or got certain results from students.”

Principal Charles McDaniel of East Ridge Middle echoes Barger’s reflections on the lesson study approach using Literacy Design Collaborative minitasks. He notes, “Teachers are asking each other: Why did your students do better than mine on the task? What did you do differently than I did in your instruction?”

In separate conversations, both Barger and McDaniel credit their teacher teams’ use of the lesson study approach with Literacy Design Collaborative for helping their schools earn “A” scores on the Florida School Report Card.

### MORE WAYS TO COLLABORATE

Finally, most images of teachers working and learning together tend to be of teachers within the same school building or district. While schools are physical centers where communities of practice develop, more and more deep teacher learning and collaboration is happening virtually via diverse platforms such as webinars, LDC CoreTools, and even social media sites such as Pinterest.

Interestingly, this is an area where the demand from practice and innovation from the field seem to be outpacing current research. Teachers report that they want further access and opportunities to learn and collaborate with others when needed, as needed, and in ways that model the deeper inquiry work that connects teacher and student learning.

Literacy Design Collaborative was designed with this in mind. Teachers can be involved in a way that is as place-based as the teacher teams of Thompson School District and Lake County Public Schools. Or, through the reach of LDC CoreTools, a teacher can create a virtual community of practice.

For example, LDC CoreTools enables an individual English language arts teacher in California to learn about Literacy Design Collaborative through online courses and materials. Then, to try it out in her classroom, the teacher might use the curriculum library to adapt a module on Kafka’s works that was designed by a teacher in Kentucky.

As the California teacher uses the student work rubric to analyze her students' papers, she might connect with a teacher from New York who used the same task to compare results and then adopt minitasks from a teacher in Pennsylvania to teach a skill she sees that her students still need to develop.

The teacher can also receive virtual professional feedback and recognition of her work via a virtual national peer review process through LDC CoreTools. It's a whole new group of teacher experts to work with and a whole new way to deepen practice.

Literacy Design Collaborative is combining elements of virtual and on-site professional learning to support teacher communities of practice in Los Angeles and New York City through a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant. At Saturn Elementary School in Los Angeles, teachers are in their first year of working together to design and implement Literacy Design Collaborative modules.

During on-site Saturday boot camps, teachers delve into the system and tools through online courses and then reflect together on the implications for their practice and classroom. Teachers apply that learning during weekly collaborative planning sessions to design tasks and instructional plans, look at student work, and determine next steps for instruction based on student needs. The teacher team gets additional support from a Literacy Design Collaborative coach, who joins the team bi-weekly via web conferencing to provide guidance and support.

The online nature of the LDC CoreTools platform ensures that this professional collaboration and learning is not confined to or determined by those team times. At any time and from any location, Saturn teachers are able to collaborate, receive feedback from the coach, and design materials.

Saturn principal Tracie Bryant explains how the system became a catalyst for teacher collaboration and professional community in her school: "We had a chance to go into [LDC CoreTools] and try to navigate it. At the onset, it looked really overwhelming because the assumption was that we would still be operating in the same mindset that, 'Everyone is going to have to do everything by themselves.' However, it was just natural that we had to do this together. And the term 'collaborative' became our approach to how we would do our learning ... and that has saved us."

### IT'S A LEARNING PROCESS

The practices we describe here are still new. Teacher leaders, participating teachers, and principals in each of the systems are the first to admit that it will take further time and effort to reach the depth of practice depicted in research and to engage additional colleagues.

They are also straightforward in their advice about how to make communities of practice effective. Mary Ellen Barger of Lake County notes that all teachers must have an equal voice in and ability to contribute to the community. As she says, "It

can't be one-sided, or it's not a growing process for everyone."

Megan Jensen, Literacy Design Collaborative's i3 grant project director, explains, "We've really learned the significance of providing targeted feedback to teachers directly about their work. The LDC curriculum alignment rubric, module structure, and online planning tools are starting to allow teachers to give one another real, targeted feedback, rather than the general, 'This looks good.'"

Tiffany Scott at Mount Dora Middle School might very well offer up the best summary of what Literacy Design Collaborative teachers working in communities of practice is all about: "We need to remember that it's not about the individual. It's about the work, the students, the practice of teaching."

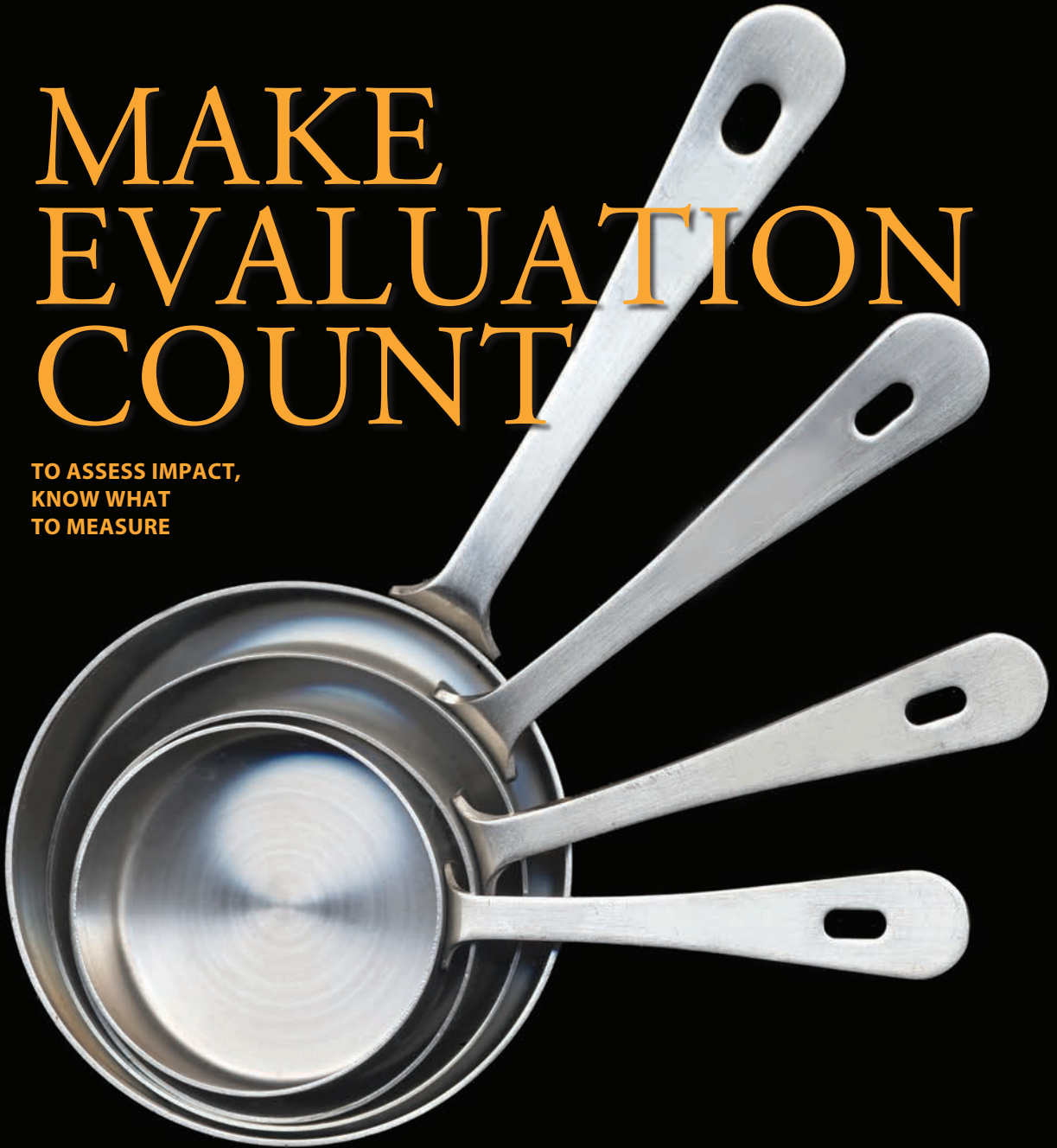
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**Suzanne Simons (suzanne@ldc.org) is chief academic officer at the Literacy Design Collaborative. ■**

# MAKE EVALUATION COUNT

TO ASSESS IMPACT,  
KNOW WHAT  
TO MEASURE



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By Amy Pendray and Jennifer Crockett

In complex educational systems, stakeholders with varied interests often put the greatest value on singular, summative outcomes tied to high-stakes tests. While those summative outcomes are useful and important, an investment in teacher learning intended to improve student achievement is also a treasure worth pursuing.

So how do we, at a systems level, know that our investment in teacher learning is making a difference? How do we ensure that professional learning is impacting teacher practice in a way that leads to improved student outcomes?

As professional development providers for myPD (an online, personalized professional growth system) in Long Beach Unified, a large urban school district in California, we feel a responsibility to wrestle with these questions. We want to deliver high-quality professional learning that ultimately increases student learning. To ensure that all teachers and students benefit from the most effective professional learning we could provide, we have to reflect on our own practices to ensure that we, too, are making a positive impact.

For us, this realization became more pronounced in the context of a broader learning community that extended beyond the borders of our district — Learning Forward’s Redesign PD Community of Practice. With outside eyes looking in on the work to challenge our assumptions and help us deepen our perspectives, we partnered with 20 other districts from across the nation and committed to a problem of practice focused on measuring the impact of our professional development.

As we have grown in our understanding of this work and developed tools to better measure this impact, our partner districts in the community have provided critical and constructive feedback to refine our work.

#### PREPARING FOR THE WORK

The process began at Learning Forward’s Annual Conference in December 2015, where we learned about Thomas R. Guskey’s *Evaluating Professional Development* (Guskey, 2000). With guidance and support from Learning Forward and McKinsey & Company facilitators, we embarked on a very messy journey in which we began to identify gaps in the way we assessed the impact of professional development on teacher beliefs, knowledge, and skills and how these affect student learning outcomes.

We realized we did not have a way to think through and close the gaps we identified. We knew it was our responsibility, in service to students and teachers, to evaluate the efficacy of our professional learning. Using Guskey’s Critical Levels of Evaluation (see box at right), we analyzed our professional development offerings.

Important trends surfaced. Our measurement of participants’ reactions (Level 1) was very strong. However, we measured use of new knowledge and skills (Level 4) less frequently, and we found challenges on several other levels, indicating a design-implementation gap.

This gap between our intentions in designing and delivering high-quality professional learning and its impact on teacher practice and student learning challenged us to consider adjustments to our approach. We not only needed to evaluate teacher learning, but also follow up with teachers to see how they were using their new knowledge and skills, and, ultimately, determine how the professional

#### GUSKEY’S CRITICAL LEVELS OF EVALUATION

**Level 1:** Participants’ reactions.

**Level 2:** Participants’ learning.

**Level 3:** Organization support and change.

**Level 4:** Use of new knowledge and skills.

**Level 5:** Student learning outcomes.

**Source:** Guskey, 2002.

learning impacted students.

To deepen our understanding of the work, we filled the next six months with discussions, academic readings, and prototyping and testing new approaches to delivering and evaluating professional development.

Seizing the opportunity for more robust conversations about evaluation, Pamela Seki, assistant superintendent in the Office of Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development, engaged the entire department in the same reflection process.

Overall, the results were similar to ours, identifying our potential to increase the impact of professional learning and providing the context for an *Evaluating Professional Development* book study to build the common foundation and framework needed to evaluate the department's professional learning. The book study led us to develop a protocol tool to help us move from Guskey's theoretical framework to the practical application in our context.

The tool would help us understand if and when we were intentionally assessing, measuring, and evaluating our professional learning. We wanted to see how all of our professional learning efforts worked together within initiative goals and what additions or adjustments might be required within each professional learning offering to address the appropriate level of evaluation.

### THE BUMPY ROAD

Although it was a little bumpy along the way, we realized two things: We needed a formal way to capture the complex thinking we were doing, and we needed to leverage that information to plan comprehensive professional learning that could be evaluated at multiple levels for its efficacy.

Thus we created a prototype of a protocol and evaluation profile matrix to help us determine what to measure at different points within a professional learning program as well as a single professional development offering. After planning the professional learning, we can use the protocol and matrix to reflect on and develop next steps in a professional learning initiative.

We tested the prototype with multiple audiences to get critical feedback and refine the protocol. One particular audience was the beginning teacher support and assessment induction team, which hosts multiple learning opportunities throughout the year.

"The protocol gave me an outside perspective of what our team was doing," said induction support provider Ashley Rhodes, "and made us think about more quantitative evaluation data rather than just going by a feeling that what we were doing was working. It gave us specific measures to consider."

These conversations surfaced the innately subjective way that we had been evaluating the efficacy of our professional learning and challenged us to consider intentional, well-thought-out, and objective measures of our efficacy in supporting teacher learning and student achievement. In some cases, it prompted us to consider building these measures in the profes-

sional learning planning in addition to adapting and revising existing professional development.

Once we refined our work, we tested it with a wider audience. We understood the potential of the process because we had built it, but we wondered if others would find as much value as we had in this reflection. We asked for feedback from a variety of sources within the Office of Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development.

"When you [Amy and Jennifer] asked me certain questions, it made me reflect on things I had not previously considered evaluating during professional development offerings. It pushed me past the boundaries of what I thought was successful," said Stacy Casanave, English language arts curriculum coach and induction coordinator.

The feedback made clear two critical distinctions that professional learning planners need to make between the types of activities at the heart of professional learning offerings. Instructional activities are best used to help participants understand professional learning content, while evaluation activities are specifically planned methods and processes to gather data to determine if the professional learning is reaching its intended goals.

The importance of clarifying and distinguishing the purpose of each activity is crucial because it is easy for the lines to get blurred. Differentiating between instructional activities and evaluation activities ensures that professional learning planners are on the right track and assessing the pertinent information to determine if program goals are being met.

Not every instructional strategy is used to evaluate professional learning's effectiveness. Some simply move the instruction forward and assist teachers in learning the content. Professional learning planners need to be cognizant of which activities determine the efficacy of the professional development offered — a process that our protocol clarified for us.

### MOVING FORWARD

As we continued to use the protocol, small insights along the way led to further refinements in our efforts to better measure all levels of our impact. Because Guskey's critical levels build on one another successively, each iteration of our process and opportunity to reflect on our work gave us a clearer picture of gaps in our professional learning offerings and equipped us with the language and understanding to fill those gaps intentionally and thoughtfully.

Having a defined process that clarified what evidence to collect and how to use it removed the subjectivity upon which professional learning planners rely to make decisions about the effectiveness of their offerings and replaced it with actionable data.

Our collective inquiry around measuring the impact of our professional learning led us to some valuable conclusions. For instance, we learned that evaluating participants' reactions (Level 1) is more than just making sure the participants were happy and had a good time during the professional learning experience.

The context (the physical space of the offering and current mental space of the participants) and process (how the professional learning is structured) specifically affect participants' overall reaction. The protocol helped us uncover the fact that we mostly evaluated for content and did not focus on gathering data on either context or process. Context and process are easily overlooked, yet play a critical role in how participants perceive the quality of professional learning.

Neglecting to assess, measure, and evaluate all aspects of participants' reactions can hinder present and future implementations of learning. In response, we developed and distributed a survey with questions that focused on context and process. The information we gathered helped us redesign the professional learning to meet our participants' identified needs, while building evaluation activities into the day helped us determine the degree to which we were meeting those needs.

Embedded in the same survey were questions that measured organization support and change (Level 3), something we had never even considered assessing. Guskey states, "Information at this level helps us document the organizational conditions [and culture] that accompany success or describe those that might explain the lack of significant improvement" (Guskey, 2000, p. 150).

We identified a clear misalignment between the systems-level professional learning and messaging around our work and site-based implementation efforts. Though we were unable to change course in the midst of the initial professional learning that yielded this data, it has shaped our strategy for partnering with site leaders to ensure coherence and site support for future implementation.

Sparked by these realizations, we were determined to address our challenges in use of new knowledge and skills (Level 4). The readings from Guskey taught us that we needed to allow sufficient time to pass between professional learning and observations of practice to evaluate participants on their use of new knowledge and skills. To accomplish this, we piloted our evaluation of Level 4 on a group of users that had already engaged in professional learning and had been using the new practices in their respective roles for awhile.

We developed a questionnaire that gathered data and information on how participants used their new knowledge over the previous three to nine months. The questions included where the participants felt confident in their use of what they had learned and where they were still feeling challenged by particular skills needed to put what they learned into practice.

The evaluation results provided specific information that allowed us to design follow-up professional learning targeted to participants' needs. We also used the data to update the professional learning content for new participants. Measuring and assessing participants' use of new knowledge and skills (Level 4) was eye-opening, and we will continue this process for each professional development offering we plan.

## A COHESIVE AND SYSTEMATIC APPROACH

Professional learning programs have overarching goals that address both student and teacher outcomes. Large initiatives often require multiple professional development offerings in order to reach those goals. The protocol we created enabled planners to look at each offering individually to evaluate the data gathered.

However, a more compelling realization was that using the protocol provided evaluation data that could also be used as a leading indicator (formative) or lagging indicator (summative) for the initiative itself. Like any good road map, leading and lagging indicators allow professional learning planners to make adjustments to their initiative along the way.

As the myPD team tested digital tools to evaluate professional learning, we identified leading indicators, such as quiz results, as well as lagging indicators, including how many sites participated and who facilitated the professional learning. These leading and lagging indicators allowed the team to make course corrections to the overall initiative, thus ensuring a cohesive and systematic approach to planning, implementing, and assessing professional learning's impact. The protocol was a useful tool for planning and reflecting on initiatives and individual offerings both individually and collectively within the larger scope of the initiative goals.

"The power of the protocol that Amy and Jennifer developed is that it moves us from theory to practice," said Nader Twal, program administrator at Long Beach. "It takes something that we all admire — Dr. Guskey's rich work on evaluating the efficacy of professional development — and it gives us a process to calibrate our work around all five levels that he describes.

"It helps us to be intentional and focused in ensuring that not only are we measuring teacher reaction and student outcomes but that we also recognize the important and intermediary measurements of teacher learning, system support, and teacher practice.

"It's iterative and honors the fact that even adult learning can be messy. But much like art, a masterpiece will emerge from the mess. It's about time that we measure what we treasure."

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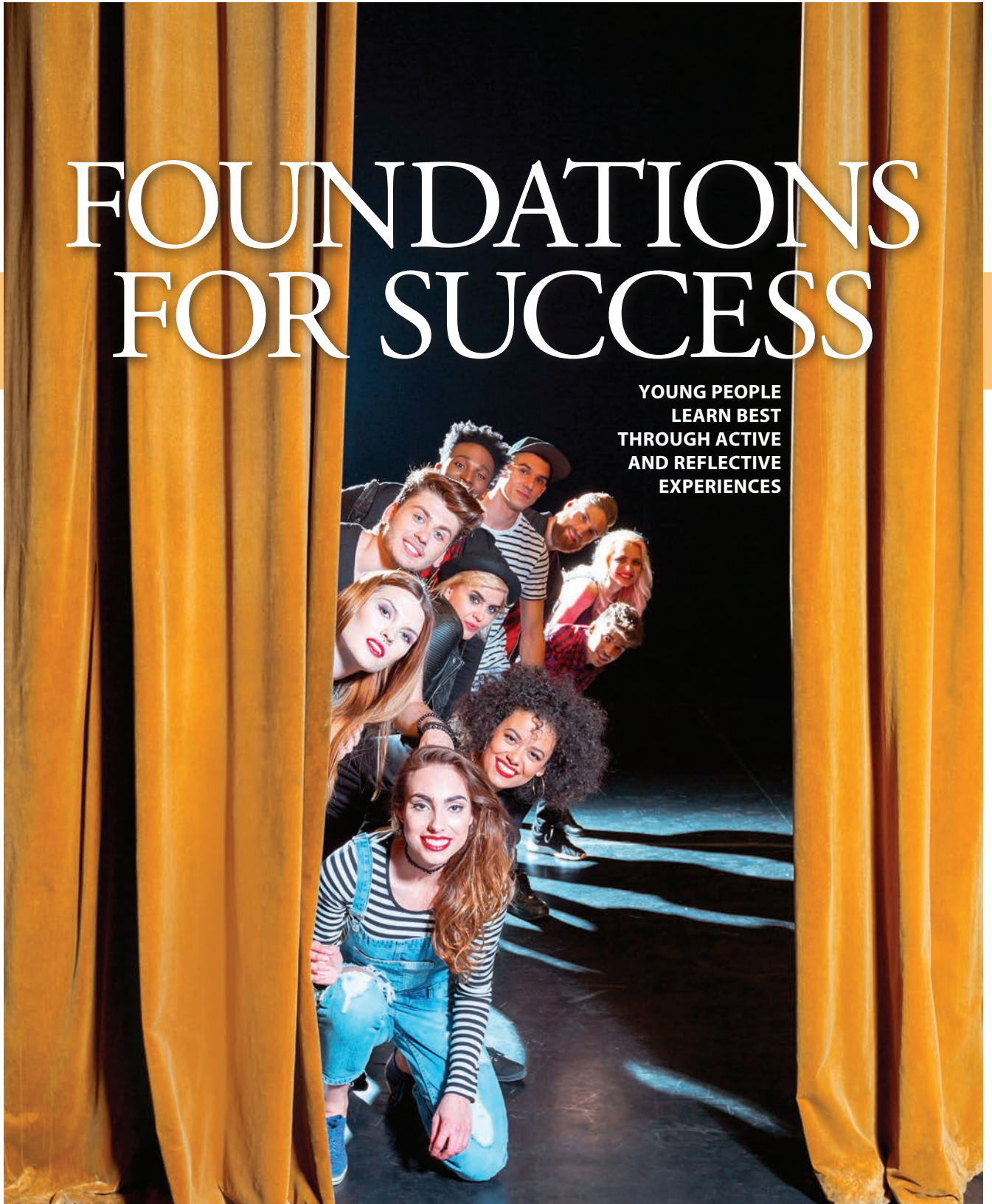
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Amy Pendray (apendray@lbschools.net) and Jennifer Crockett (jcrockett@lbschools.net) are program specialists at myPD. ■

# FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESS

YOUNG PEOPLE  
LEARN BEST  
THROUGH ACTIVE  
AND REFLECTIVE  
EXPERIENCES





## Performing in a play becomes a developmental experience with the addition of an opportunity for reflection.

By Jenny Nagaoka

Succeeding at learning, and at life, takes more than academic ability. That's not news, but with studies on the importance of qualities like "grit" grabbing headlines, there's a growing conviction that fostering the right mindsets and social-emotional skills in students will lead to better school achievement and post-secondary success. Policymakers are eager to measure these skills and mindsets. And educators are searching for ways to teach them.

To guide that search, *Foundations for Young Adult Success*, a 2016 report by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, synthesized decades of research, theory, and practice from the fields of youth development, psychology, sociology, economics, education, and the cognitive sciences. The report describes the personal qualities that underlie a productive and fulfilling adulthood and the kind of experiences that adults can create for children, in or out of school, to lead them there.

These developmental experiences have two essential characteristics: They must be *active*, allowing students to design, create, practice, puzzle, experiment, and do. They must also be *reflective*, helping young people draw meaning from their experiences.

### DEVELOPMENTAL EXPERIENCES

Youth development programs provide some of the best examples of developmental experiences and how educators

can work with students to produce positive results. Mia, a Chicago high school student who was part of the study, had joined a civic action club led by her English teacher during an elective period.

At the time, Mia was a sophomore, a good student but a difficult one who antagonized teachers and picked on peers. Her teacher saw her behavior as an attempt to gain power for herself because she lacked self-esteem, a sense of belonging, and an outlet for her talents.

In the civic action club, based on a model by a local nonprofit, students identified problems in their schools or communities. Then they learned how to tackle those problems through a process that included research, data collection, brainstorming possible solutions, selecting strategies, and, once the project was complete, evaluating the results.

Developmental experiences challenge young people with novel situations, which may push them out of their comfort zones. When first asked to brainstorm problems the club might address, students resisted, their teacher recalls. "Nobody cares what we think, and nothing is going to change," the more vocal ones told her.

Mia didn't participate at first or even appear to pay much attention. She explained later that she was used to teachers lecturing, but this one "actually wanted us to en-



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gage with her. That was weird, so I reacted a little negatively.”

To introduce the students to civic action, the teacher had them interview peers throughout the school to find out what neighborhoods they came from and illustrate their findings on a map. Then they discussed why it might be hard to build a sense of community at a school that drew from such a wide geographic area. That first small project engaged them, and their anger began to subside, their teacher recalled.

When the 10-week elective club was over, students including Mia wanted to continue it after school. In an early victory, the club convinced the local school council to let students have a voice in selecting the new principal and then designed a process for doing so.

“I felt valued,” Mia recalled. “[Students] felt like their voice mattered.”


### KEYS TO CHANGE

Developmental experiences like the civic action club help young people to develop three key factors that lead to education, and career attainment, civic engagement, and healthy relationships. These are a sense of *agency*, or being able to take action and set a course for their lives, *competencies* that allow them to perform tasks well, and an *integrated identity*, which is a clear sense of self that allows a person to choose actions consistent with their values, beliefs, and goals.

As Mia became more involved with the club, she found her “mean girl” attitude at odds with her new identity as a civic leader.

“Being involved in your community and being a leader, you can’t be this brat,” she explained. “You have to be open-minded and respectful and kind. I had to change if I wanted to make changes in my community.”

When Mia became the club’s president her senior year, she underwent a particularly intense period of reflection and growth. At first, leading was a struggle. At meetings, she rushed through the agenda without pausing for anyone’s in-



**FOUNDATIONS FOR YOUNG ADULT SUCCESS:**  
A DEVELOPMENTAL FRAMEWORK

*The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, June 2015*

University of Chicago researchers describe the elements that children need for adult success. Download the report at [www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Foundations-for-Young-Adult-Success.pdf](http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Foundations-for-Young-Adult-Success.pdf)

put. She found it difficult to relinquish control, even over the colors in the hand-made posters.

“She was really frustrated,” her teacher recalls. “She felt she was a bad leader.”

The teacher said that her role wasn’t to jump in and rescue Mia but to stand on the side and coach her, “helping her to reflect on what went wrong and how to adapt. Kids have to fail and learn from their failures. It builds perseverance.”

As Mia honed her leadership skills, she said she came to see herself as someone who could solve problems, work with people she didn’t agree with, and bounce back from failures.

Developmental experiences aren’t only for personal growth. They can be a deeply engaging way to teach academic skills and the kind of 21st-century skills employers are seeking, like analytic thinking, collaboration, communication, and creative problem solving. Students

in the civic action club analyzed social science research, designed surveys, conducted interviews, wrote persuasively, and presented their reasoning publicly. One of Mia’s favorite projects was convincing the local school council to overturn a hated uniform policy with an argument based on teacher interviews, a student survey, and other research.

Many youth and after-school programs teach academic skills in ways that engage kids — conducting science experiments, writing the school newspaper, building robots, performing in a play. Some classrooms also emphasize hands-on or collaborative learning. What elevates these activities to developmental experiences is the depth of the engagement and the opportunity for reflection.

For kids to become deeply involved in learning, they need challenging, open-ended tasks that require them to think outside the box and grapple with difficult problems. They also need to be able to make choices about their activities and how to carry them out. Many psychologists see autonomy as a basic need, and research finds that it is also critical to building self-regulation, values, and agency.

As young people carry out their activities, they need the opportunity to practice, fall short, get feedback, and try again. In school, by contrast, assignments are often quickly evaluated without a chance to redo and improve work with coaching from the teacher.

Work also needs to be meaningful to students and have value for others, which builds their confidence, their own values, and sense of agency. Some teachers have found ways to build public service projects into the curriculum.

As students dive into complex projects, they also need a chance to reflect on their experiences so that they can gain useful meanings from them. Mia might have concluded from the club meetings that went poorly that she didn’t have the ability to lead, but instead her teacher guided the reflection in a way that helped her see an opportunity for improvement.

## LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Young people learn best when adults design experiences that allow for action and reflection. Active experiences allow students to:



- **Encounter** novel situations and more capable peers and adults who serve as role models;
- **Tinker** — test, discover, design, puzzle, build, experiment, create, play, and imagine;
- **Choose** activities, companions, goals, and ways of presenting themselves;
- **Practice** and receive feedback that helps them develop competence; and
- **Contribute** to the world in ways that they find meaningful and that others value.

Reflection helps young people solidify what they have learned and make sense of their experience. Adults can guide young people to:



- **Describe and evaluate** their lives, feelings, thoughts, and experiences;
- **Connect** new experiences and ideas to what they already know;
- **Envision** themselves in the future, seeing positive images of what they want to become and negative images of what they want to avoid becoming; and
- **Integrate** the insights, skills, or other lessons from an experience into a larger sense of themselves.

### IMPERATIVE TO SUCCESS

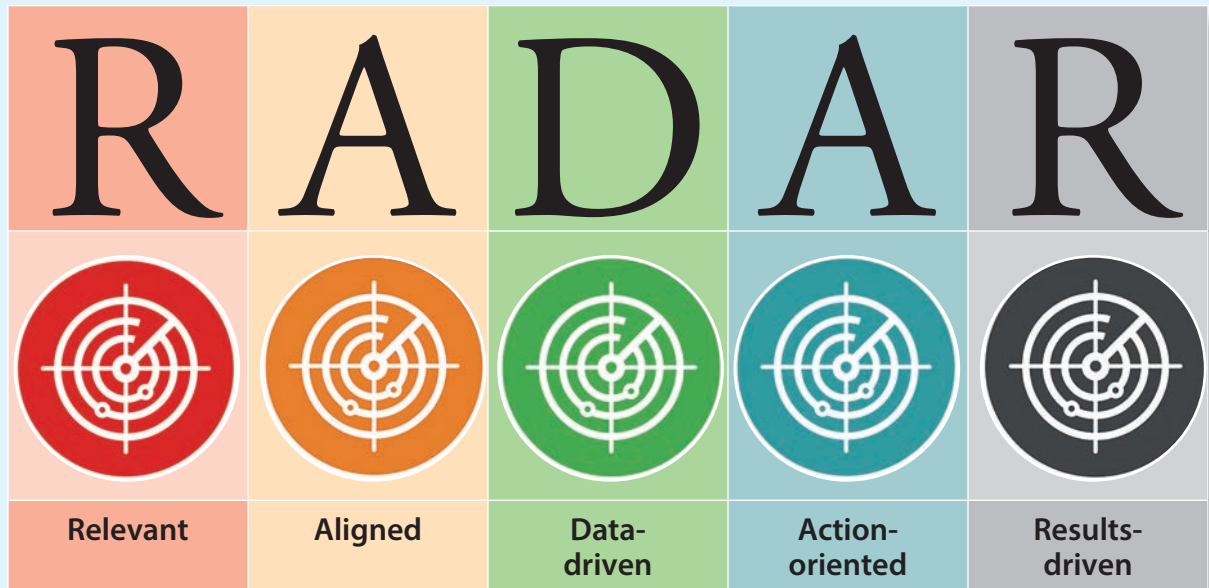
Ensuring all young people have access to a multitude of rich developmental experiences is imperative to their success. While research can provide a framework about the kinds of experiences young people need to grow into a rich and satisfying adulthood, it doesn't yet provide all the details. It's not yet clear what specific strategies educators should adopt to teach academic content in a way that also fosters personal growth. Designing such instruction will require innovation and time for developmental experiences, much like those we want for young people — time to design, create, test out, make mistakes, reflect, and revise.

We have also seen the demand for measures of qualities like grit far outpacing the state of the field of measurement. This creates great potential for these measures to be ineffective or to otherwise lead practitioners down a fruitless path. It is prudent for district leaders to proceed cautiously with incorporating noncognitive measures into school accountability systems. Understanding how best to measure noncognitive factors in a meaningful way that has real potential to improve practice takes time.

In an age when accountability is a dominant way of managing schools, the tolerance for mistakes is very small. For real shifts to happen in educational

practice, practitioners need support from school and district leadership, as well as safe spaces to experiment and learn. Further, this is not an endeavor that can be undertaken by schools or adults acting alone. It will require parallel efforts to rethink what policies and structures are needed to provide opportunities to children and youth; support adults who raise, teach, or care for young people; and facilitate coordination and learning across sectors.

•  
**Jenny Nagaoka (jkn@uchicago.edu) is deputy director of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. ■**



# RADAR PROTOCOL GUIDES PLANNING

**H**illsborough County Public Schools in Florida has long been known as a leader in teacher learning — one with a culture of continuous improvement. To that end, leadership in the district’s Office of Teaching and Learning joined the Learning Forward-led Redesign PD Community of Practice last year in part to develop protocols and procedures to better ensure coherence and alignment across the district.

What they created was an organizing document that could be used by learning leaders to make sure school plans are aligned with the district’s framework for effective teaching. But it is also being used by school leadership to differentiate support needs and by individual teachers to backward map during their goal-setting process.

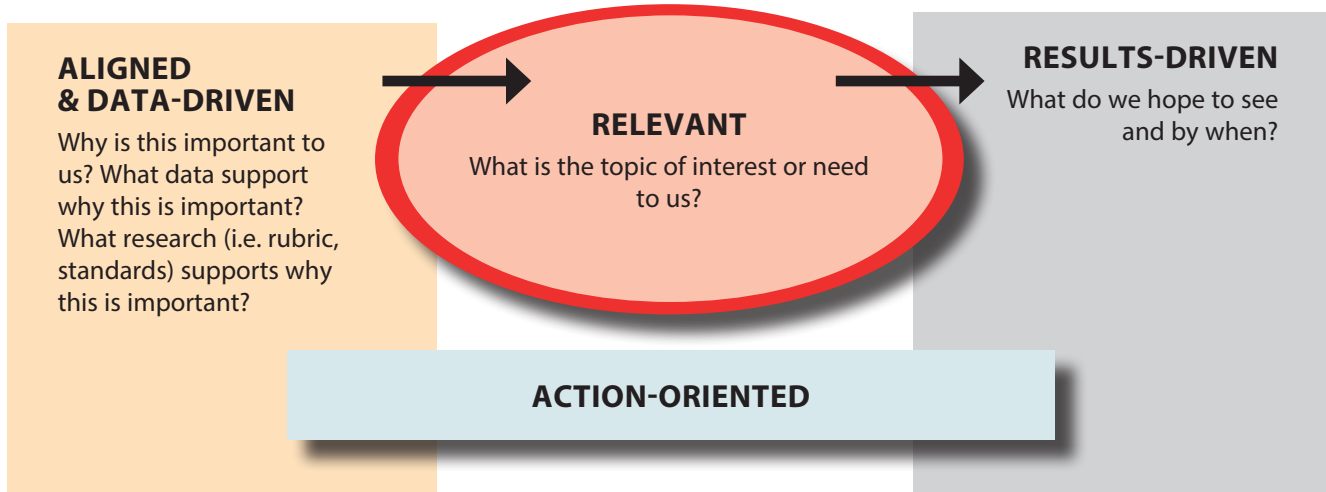
The tool is called RADAR, which stands for

the qualities that should be found in any resulting professional learning plan or action/needs list: relevant, aligned, data-driven, action-oriented, and results-driven.

RADAR was first created to help a district-level administrator work through conversations with school chiefs to guide her own planning, but it can be adapted using your system’s language, data, goals, and more. Shannon Bogle, an area supervisor in Hillsborough County’s Office of Teaching and Learning, is using it to create a “train the trainer” model, inviting teacher leaders to use it to give her feedback on her department.

It’s also being used by professional learning community facilitators within the district. “It’s proven a great tool to guide conversations and planning,” Bogle says, “but it’s also a living, breathing document. We hope it proves as useful for other systems as it has for ours.”

# PUTTING HIGH-QUALITY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ON OUR RADAR

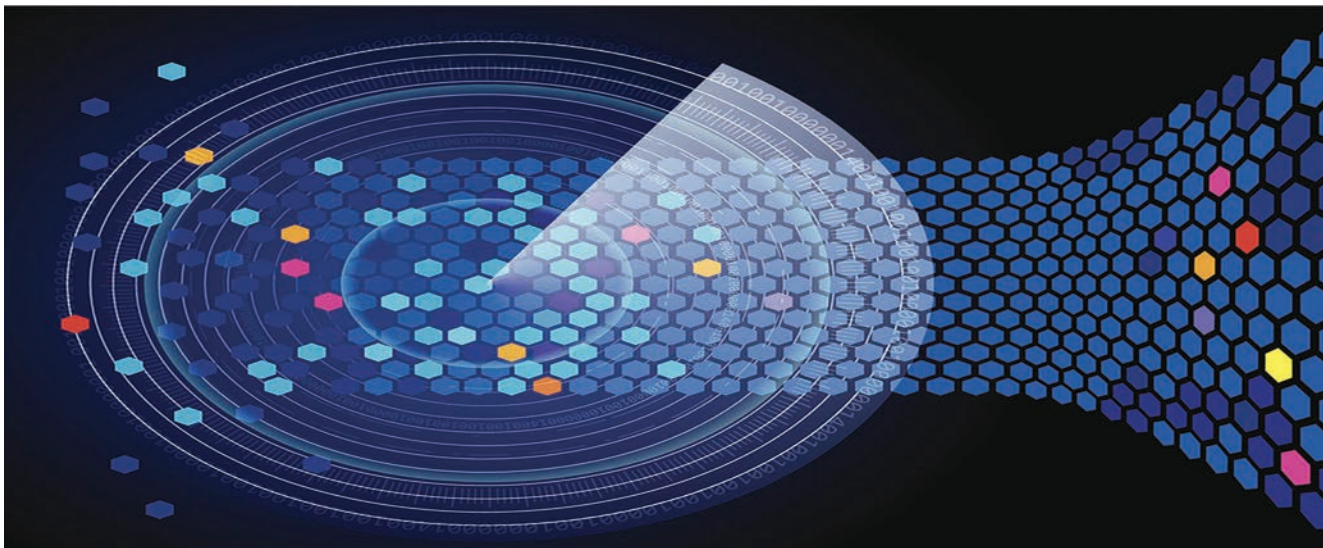


How will teachers get nonevaluative feedback on how they're doing?	How will teachers receive support as they try this?	How will teachers learn more about this?	When might this happen?	Who might help us with this?

RELEVANT	ALIGNED	DATA/RESULTS-DRIVEN
Structure	Standards	Needs assessment
Presentation	Research	Results-driven
Adult learning principles	Rubric	Plan for implementation
Content	District strategic plan	Student achievement
Resources	School improvement plan	Changes in teacher practice
Timely		

RELEVANT
What is the relationship between course objectives and course activities?
What tools and resources will be used to support the learning?
How will participants be actively engaged in the content (i.e. reflection, inquiry, collaboration, etc.)?
How will participants build on their current knowledge?
How will the professional learning meet individual and group needs?
ALIGNED
How is the professional learning aligned to Florida standards?
In what way(s) is the professional learning aligned to the teacher evaluation rubric?
How will you make these connections explicit for teachers?
DATA/RESULTS-DRIVEN
Why is the professional learning needed?
By whom?
What skills and knowledge will participants be expected to demonstrate following the professional learning?
How will implementation of skills be supported? By whom? How often?
What is the anticipated impact on students?





Component		Evident	Emerging	Not apparent
<b>RELEVANT</b>				
Compelling why	How will we communicate the relevance and “compelling why” of the professional learning to participants?	The relevance and purpose of the professional learning are clear. The content of the professional learning is relevant to all intended participants.	The relevance and purpose of the professional learning are vague. The content of the professional learning is relevant to some participants.	The purpose and relevancy of the professional learning are unclear.
Resources	What tools and resources will we use to support the professional learning?	The tools and resources used for this professional learning are relevant to all intended participants taking the course.	The tools and resources being used for this professional learning are relevant to a group of participants within the course.	The tools and resources are not relevant to the work of the participants taking this course.
Engagement	How will we actively engage participants in the content (i.e. reflection, inquiry, collaboration, etc.)?	Most of the time during the professional learning, participants reflect, inquire, and collaborate with colleagues to improve their practice.	There is an uneven balance of time between instruction and time for participants to reflect, inquire, and collaborate with colleagues.	The instructor delivers all content with no time built in to allow participants to reflect, inquire, and collaborate with colleagues.
Differentiation	How will the professional learning meet individual and group needs?	The content of the professional learning is designed to meet educators’ individual needs based on experience level and specialty area. Activities are varied to meet the needs of all learning styles.	The content meets the needs of groups of teachers. Activities are not varied and only center around one learning style.	The content does not take into consideration the needs of teachers based on experience, specialty area, or learning style.

Component		Evident	Emerging	Not apparent
<b>ALIGNED</b>				
Florida standards	How is the professional learning aligned to Florida standards?	The professional learning is explicitly aligned to Florida standards.	The professional learning is partially aligned to Florida standards.	The professional learning is not aligned to Florida standards.
Evaluation rubric	In what way(s) is the professional learning aligned to the teacher evaluation rubric?	The professional learning is aligned to the evaluation rubric with specific links to multiple components.	The professional learning is connected to one component of the rubric.	The professional learning is not connected to the evaluation rubric.
Strategic plan/school improvement plan	How is the professional learning connected to the district strategic plan or school improvement plan?	There is a specific and clearly stated connection to the district strategic plan and school improvement plan.	There is a connection between the professional learning and the district strategic plan or school improvement plan.	There is no connection between the professional learning and district or school plans.
Research-based	Is the professional learning based on research? If so, what research?	The professional learning is based on specific research.	The professional learning is partially based or linked to research.	The professional learning is not evidence- or research-based.

Component		Evident	Emerging	Not apparent
<b>DATA/RESULTS-DRIVEN</b>				
Needs assessment	Why is the professional learning needed? By whom?	Professional learning needs are determined from specific evidence or data with specific stakeholders identified.	Professional learning needs are based on general trends for a broad audience of stakeholders.	No data used to determine need.
Change in practice	What skills and knowledge will participants be expected to demonstrate following the professional learning?	Plan for change of practice is cohesive and contains clear expectations for teacher application.	Plan for change of practice is vague and rooted in theory, without application.	No plan for change of practice.
Follow-up/support	How will we support implementation of skills? By whom? How often?	Plan for implementation is detailed and includes required coaching and mentoring until educators can implement the new learning with fidelity.	Plan for implementation is vague and includes optional coaching and mentoring or a broad system of support.	No implementation plan is indicated.
Student outcomes	What is the anticipated impact on students?	Impact on student learning includes measurable goals and may include a plan to monitor progress.	Impact on student learning is stated as broad, unmeasurable goals.	No impact on student learning is provided.

Source: Hillsborough County Public Schools, Office of Professional Development. Used with permission.





“ This time with the Academy has been the most valuable professional learning experience of my 28-year career. To focus on the Standards for Professional Learning, select a problem of practice, and work with colleagues at all levels of my organization around a common problem has propelled our district forward in focus and alignment of our professional learning goals to truly impact student achievement.

Joe McFarland, Academy Class of 2015

## Are you ready to take your professional learning to a new level?

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Learning Forward's Academy is a 2½-year blended learning community, led by experts in the field.

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- 1 **Bring your biggest challenge** related to adult or student learning to the Academy coaches, Learning Forward leaders, and other participants.
- 2 In collaboration, **clarify the authentic problems** of practice.
- 3 Study the problem, build knowledge and skills, and **work together** to develop solutions.
- 4 **Transform** your practice and your organization.
- 5 **Measure and evaluate** your results.



## Instructional rounds contribute to communities of practice

### WHAT THE STUDY SAYS

When district and school administrators and other key leaders engage together in instructional rounds within schools, they develop social networks that assume characteristics of communities of practice. Within these communities, they build relationships and develop a common language and shared understanding about teaching and learning. The practice of instructional rounds is a form of organizational routine that elevates the importance of instructional leadership.

Researchers analyzed the development of social networks in three districts. They found limited association between the engagement in rounds and the establishment of social networks, yet they identified factors that can inform the implementation of rounds to increase instructional leadership. They connect administrators who are not typically connected with one another in an organizational routine designed to elevate quality teaching and learning.

**Joellen Killion (joellen.killion@learningforward.org) is senior advisor to Learning Forward. In each issue of *JSD*, Killion explores a recent research study to help practitioners understand the impact of particular professional learning practices on student outcomes.**

### Study description

Shifting administrators' focus from managerial to instructional leadership requires changing their organizational routines. The study's purpose was to explore how to promote the shift and to build relationships among administrators and supervisors within a district to increase technical, human, and social capital for instructional leadership. The study examined how instructional rounds brought administrators in diverse roles together in communities of practice to create new patterns of interaction, break down traditional barriers of district hierarchy and roles, and coalesce support for the improvement of teaching and learning.

Administrators participated in several instructional rounds per year for each of the two years of the study. An instructional round is one form of an organizational routine that brings administrators together in groups to conduct brief classroom observations, take notes, produce feedback, and report to one another about their observations.

### Questions

Researchers posed two research questions:

1. "To what extent do networks focused on teaching and learning in districts engaged in instructional rounds exhibit the characteristics of communities of practice?"

2. "What is the relationship between the evolution of the networks focused on teaching and learning and the changes in the nature, extent, and understanding of rounds?" (p. 1029)

### Methodology

Researchers applied social network analysis to assess the effects of instructional rounds in leveraging the connections among district and school administrators and supervisors to increase their focus on teaching and learning. They selected three of 11 districts that were members of a regional superintendents' network in a Northeast state that began meeting in 2008-09 school year. The network met monthly over multiple years to increase "excellent and equitable outcomes for students" (p. 1029).

The three districts represented a range of demographics among the mostly suburban or exurban small to midsize districts within the network and differing levels of average family income (middle, higher, and highest income). Each district, labeled by its income level, had participated in the network since the 2008-09 inception. In one of the selected districts, the superintendent had spread the practice of instructional rounds to other administrators within his district before the study's inception. The superintendents employed an adapted version of instructional rounds

## At a glance

Instructional rounds are a form of organizational routines among school and district administrators that contribute to establishing social networks within communities of practice to build a districtwide focus on instruction.

## THE STUDY

**Hatch, T., Hill, K., & Roegman, R. (2016).** Investigating the role of instructional rounds in the development of social networks and district-wide improvement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(4), 1022-1053.

process that included a problem of practice, classroom observations, sharing observations, reflecting on implications, and sharing feedback with the host district and schools.

During the 2010-11 and 2011-12 school years, researchers used social network surveys to gather data from all school and district administrators at the end of each year of the study. They collected additional data from interviews with superintendents and administrators within the three districts.

## Analysis

Researchers applied social network analyses to measure multiple aspects of administrator interactions. Social network analysis permitted measures of each district's network's density (the ratio of existing connections to potential connections); reciprocity (the percentage of connections that are reciprocated); fragmentation (the proportion of pairs not connected among other pairs); and centrality (a measure of the influence or

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PRACTITIONERS

**W**hile the results of this study are inconsistent, researchers highlight the necessity of professional learning for leaders to increase technical, human, and social capital for successful districtwide and school reform. Professional learning in the study aligns with five of Learning Forward's *Standards for Professional Learning* (Learning Forward, 2011).

With an emphasis on shifting leaders' routines to reinforce the overall initiative outcomes, the study spotlights the necessity for districtwide coordination and focus on high-priority outcomes and leverages leaders' routine work to emphasize and expand their support (**Leadership**).

Through its emphasis on teaching and learning, instructional rounds develop learning communities among leaders to increase the frequency, extent, and nature of interactions so that they formed new communities of practice that increased access to knowledge and resources and built a common language and understanding of effective teaching and learning (**Learning Communities**). Such communities reflect shared goals and a culture of collective responsibility among all leaders, including those who had not

prominence of a particular actor within the network) of relationships between and among all district and school administrators and other staff who worked at schools and central office to support instruction, such as instructional coaches.

The survey measured participation in and understanding of rounds; climate; level of trust within the district; and the frequency of interactions with other administrators about teaching and learning, district strategy, equity, teacher evaluation, and Common Core

previously been engaged in instructional reforms for the success of the districtwide initiative.

Focusing on a high-priority vehicle for student success, teaching and learning and the capacity to support it, this study adheres to the **Outcomes** standard. The districtwide reforms aligned teaching and learning with administrators' capacity with role expectations and student success. Using instructional rounds as the learning design, the study builds coherence with past professional learning (**Outcomes**) and uses a design that models salient practices in authentic situations over time (**Learning Designs**). In addition, using a learning design such as instructional standards reinforces the necessity of alignment and coherence. The study provides data to examine the effects of the new routines on administrator practice (**Data**), yet fails to provide data on impact on student learning or the quality of teaching and learning.

The study emphasizes that changing educator practice through communities of practice is a necessary, yet insufficient means to support the successful implementation of districtwide reforms.

## Reference

**Learning Forward. (2011).** *Standards for Professional Learning*. Oxford, OH: Author.

curriculum.

Each network was mapped visually in Year 1 and 2 to examine how the nature of the network within each district changed. Researchers hypothesized that implementing an organizational routine such as instructional rounds would create social networks of administrators that would exhibit high density and reciprocity and low fragmentation and centrality, typical characteristics of communities of practice, and that those trends would continue over time and an association

between changes in the networks and in administrators' understanding of rounds.

### Results

The results among the three districts varied. In the middle-income district, the Year 1 problem of practice was student engagement in secondary schools and literacy in elementary schools. In the second year, the problem of practice was using nonjudgmental language.

Participation in instructional rounds increased from 75% of administrators in Year 1 to 90% in Year 2, with a moderate, statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ) increase in administrator understanding of the problem of practice over the two years. The measure of centrality indicated that fewer administrators were the only initiators of conversations about teaching and learning and that there was more widespread access to knowledge and resources within the network.

In the higher-income district, the administrators adapted their existing practice of focused school visits to instructional rounds to add rigor and focus to them. They completed instructional rounds in Year 1 and then dropped the required engagement in rounds in Year 2 and replaced them with professional learning communities (PLCs).

One PLC chose to continue the practice of rounds. As a result, participation dropped from Year 1 (100%) to Year 2 (79%), and there was no statistical difference in understanding of the problem of practice. The decrease in participation and understanding paralleled an increase in centralization within the network, suggesting that fewer people had influence and were considered sources of resources and knowledge within the network.

In the highest-income district, the superintendent expanded the number of rounds from six in Year 1 to 20 in Year 2 with a focus on accountable talk and student engagement. The

assistant superintendent responsible for implementation of instructional rounds left the district in Year 2.

Administrators were only required to participate in rounds if they were in the host school. However, participation increased from Year 1 (57%) to Year 2 (89%) and demonstrated a statistically significant increase in understanding the problem of practice ( $p < .001$ ). In addition, the ability to influence others and access to knowledge were less centralized, as expected with increased participation, yet density, reciprocity, and centrality remained steady and fragmentation increased.

Changes over Year 1 and 2 in network density and reciprocity ( $p < .05$ ) increased only in the middle-income district, as hypothesized, and centrality and fragmentation ( $p < .05$ ) decreased. In the higher-income district, despite the decrease in participation, overall density remained stable and reciprocity increased slightly. Fragmentation also decreased slightly. In the highest-income district, there were no statistically significant changes in density or reciprocity and fragmentation increased slightly.

Results from the three districts were inconsistent and may be associated with the varied conditions in which the implementation of instructional rounds occurred. Researchers propose that formal organization structures, such as roles of administrators, school levels, office locations, district geography, staff turnover, and job responsibilities, may influence the degree to which organizational routines such as instructional rounds contribute to social networks within districts.

For example, within the districts, there was clustering of connections among administrators by school level. Researchers suggest that there is an interaction between organizational routines included in rounds and those in other initiatives, such as the implementation of PLCs in the higher-income district. Success with

districtwide initiatives may require implementing multiple types of routines such as instructional rounds that promote dense, reciprocal, decentralized social networks among administrators that reduce fragmentation and selecting routines that are aligned with the type of reform initiative. They stress, however, that routines and social networks may be necessary, yet are insufficient alone to achieve districtwide reform.

### Limitations

Three major limitations of this study stand out. The first is the lack of any baseline data for comparison purposes. Superintendents in each district had experienced some form of instructional rounds in years before the initiation of the study and, at least in one case, expanded the practice to other administrators within the district before the study began.

The lack of baseline data for any district makes it difficult to know how much of the changes reported in this study are the result of the expected participation in instructional rounds of all district and building administrators and other instructional leaders in the two years of the study.

The second limitation is the change in the design of the level of participation and the variation of the number of available rounds within each district, making it challenging to know how the conditions within each district influenced results. The third limitation is inability to generalize the results of this study because of the sample size and the characteristics of the participating districts.

With these limitations in place, there are opportunities for improvement in the research design and for further study on the role of organizational routines and social networks as a means to increase technical, human, and social capacity to increase administrators' instructional leadership. ■



## How to support a coach

Most teachers, including experienced ones, need support to continue to evolve professionally, hone their practice, and use new tools. This support is most powerful when offered routinely and on the job by skilled professionals. In *Coaching for Impact*, Learning Forward, the University of Florida Lastinger Center, and Public Impact call on the nation's education leaders to expand their commitment to high-quality coaching for all teachers. The report outlines six pillars essential to creating meaningful coaching roles.

[www.learningforward.org/publications/coaching-for-impact](http://www.learningforward.org/publications/coaching-for-impact)

## Has everyone been heard?

What went wrong in one district's efforts to overhaul its professional learning system? Despite its best intentions, the professional development team left out a critical component of launching a new initiative — engaging stakeholders. Engaging stakeholders deliberately is a critical element of a comprehensive performance management process. The fall 2016 issue of the *Tools for Learning Schools* newsletter outlines that process and includes tools that support the major stakeholder discussion points to build a solid structure from the start.

[www.learningforward.org/publications/tools-for-learning-schools](http://www.learningforward.org/publications/tools-for-learning-schools)



## Learning Forward communities update

Learning Forward is upgrading its member information systems. As part of this transition, we are working on an improved communities platform solution, and we'll notify all members when that is available. Visit the Communities page for information on specific ongoing networks during this transition. Questions? Contact the business office at [office@learningforward.org](mailto:office@learningforward.org) or 800-727-7288.

[www.learningforward.org/communities](http://www.learningforward.org/communities)

## Measure your impact

States and districts work with Learning Forward to assess their policy infrastructures and measure the quality of professional learning experienced by educators in their systems. Explore what Learning Forward's Professional Learning Policy and Impact Review can do to help improve the return on investment dollars your state spends on professional learning.

[www.learningforward.org/consulting/policy-impact-review](http://www.learningforward.org/consulting/policy-impact-review)



## Stories waiting to be told

*Dawn Wilson, a lead coach for Learning Forward Academy, writes about the benefits of blogging:*

“Educators spend their professional lives in experience-rich environments. These experiences are stories waiting to be told. “Blogs can tell the story of who you are; who your students are; describe your professional learning values; teach a lesson by sharing how a skill was mastered or change was implemented; motivate change by showing how you learned something through failure or success; establish the case for change; allow your audience to see a situation through a different lens or from a different perspective; create a vision of success; share what’s working with students; and celebrate colleagues and students.

“Regardless of your role ... teacher, coach, administrator, or student ... your words have the power to offer perspective, insight, learning, understanding, encouragement, and hope.”

[www.learningforward.org/publications/blog/learning-forward-blog/2016/10/26/blogging...-learning-beyond-boundaries](http://www.learningforward.org/publications/blog/learning-forward-blog/2016/10/26/blogging...-learning-beyond-boundaries)



Members of the Tustin High School leadership team include, from left: Eric Zamora, Derek Johnson, Maribel Herrera-Olmedo, Ryan Miller, Melissa Trout, Celeste Kelly, Jamie Ernst, principal Christine Matos, Sheila Moeller, Delia Racines, Ali del Castillo, Joanna Vandal, Joanna Lane, and Randy Reta. Not pictured are team members Michele Boudreaux, Timothy Grave, Roland Jones, and Claire Gocke.

## Tustin High School wins 2016 Learning Team Award

The leadership team at Tustin High School in Tustin, California, has won the 2016 Shirley Hord Teacher Learning Team Award. The award is given annually to a school-based learning team that successfully implements a cycle of continuous improvement that results in increased teaching effectiveness.

Tustin High's leadership team is made up of 13 instructional coaches (called iCOACHes), as well as three assistant principals, a "coach of coaches," and school principal Christine Matos. The team engages in a cycle of improvement designed to increase members' coaching skills and help them use various forms of student and teacher data to improve teaching and learning.

"The Tustin High School leadership team exemplifies the elements of a team using the cycle of continuous improvement in a collegial way to

search out problems, explore solutions, and make changes to increase its effectiveness," said Learning Forward Scholar Laureate Shirley Hord. "Team members openly share their classroom practices and suggest to others how they might respond to classroom issues. The teachers' talk is about data and its basis for their professional learning goals. It is clear that they believe that student achievement and the learning of the school's adult professionals are undeniably related."

"I am impressed with the vertical and horizontal alignment of the instructional leadership team at Tustin High School," said Learning Forward Executive Director Stephanie Hirsh. "Team members are committed to the learning cycle, and they are data-driven and goal-oriented. This team demonstrates its understanding and application of the cycle of learning, and there is evidence that the team's

commitment to the process has led to improved outcomes for all. This leadership team sets a powerful example for all other learning teams in the school."

Teams from across the United States and Canada submitted applications for the award. Applications included documentation of each team's work and its impact on teaching and learning, as well as a video showcasing the team engaging in the cycle of continuous improvement.

Located in Orange County in southern California, Tustin High School is a Title I school serving 2,200 students.

The award, sponsored by Corwin, includes funds to support attendance at Learning Forward's Annual Conference for team members, \$2,500 to support collaborative professional learning, and a gift of Corwin books for the school's library.



## Learning in name and practice

Working collaboratively with teams of professionals continues to be a practice embraced within our educational communities. This is an important trend that should continue. In fact, I've seen the benefits of this approach in practice.

Collaboration can take many forms. There are collaborative teams, communities of practice, learning communities, and learning teams. Regardless of which type of collaboration occurs in your environment, learning is the key element.

In practice, I've seen teams of teachers come together with a strong purpose and a strong desire to improve — but even they need a structure in place to achieve meaningful learning. Often these structures are put in place to help expedite and frame the experience. For example, professional learning communities expert Rick DuFour has created four questions for professional learning teams:

1. What is it we want our students to know?
2. How will we know if our students are learning?
3. How will we respond when students do not learn?
4. How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient? (DuFour & DuFour, 2012)

Sticking tightly to such a structure

**John Eyolfson is president of Learning Forward's board of trustees.**

### on board JOHN EYOLFSON

is essential to improving learning communities in a way that increases student achievement. However, there must be a conscious effort to acquire new knowledge, skills, and dispositions that ultimately change teaching practices in the classroom.

I say this from experience. I am working with a group of teachers passionate about improving student achievement by implementing brain-based strategies in their classrooms. During professional learning sessions, teachers reflected on their practices and identified areas of weakness they wanted to address.

One teacher — a science teacher at a local high school — wanted to see how using specific and strategic questioning strategies would help students engage with scientific concepts. He applied a technique found in David Sousa's book, *How the Brain Learns* (Corwin, 2011). At his invitation, I came into his classroom to collect evidence of the change in technique through video. He wanted to know if these techniques would make a difference.

Our district has invested in some relatively inexpensive equipment known as Swivl that will track a teacher wearing a special lanyard/microphone throughout the classroom. I spent a short time helping him frame his question as well as identifying

specific short-term outcomes before the taping. I spent about 15 minutes in his classroom operating the video equipment. After the lesson, he watched the video alone, then I followed up with a coaching conversation. He was able to use the video as evidence of how students were interacting with the concepts. He could also track which students were engaged and home in on the responses.

He asked his class about the effectiveness of the new questioning techniques. Even though he had been teaching 20-plus years, he felt obligated to improve his teaching and learning environment. He not only could identify what went well, he also was able to identify his next short-term outcome and goal.

The structure did its job. It brought teachers together in a meaningful way to work together. And for this teacher's students, it came down to three steps: He acquired new knowledge and skills, implemented these new practices into his classroom, and received meaningful feedback through video and a coaching conversation. Through structure and a desire to improve, the "learning" in our learning community was not only in name but also in practice.

### REFERENCE

**DuFour, R. & DuFour, R.B. (2012).** *Essentials for principals: The school leader's guide to professional learning communities at work.* Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree. ■

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## book club

HIGH EXPECTATIONS TEACHING:  
How We Persuade Students to Believe and Act on  
"Smart is Something You Can Get"

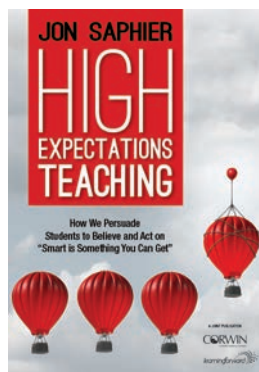
By Jon Saphier

**H**igh Expectations Teaching is an assets-based approach to advancing student achievement by helping students believe that "smart is something you can get" and that one's ability to do something is based on the effort extended to build it.

Author Jon Saphier debunks the myth of fixed intelligence by presenting evidence that effort creates ability. He emphasizes the critical importance of teacher language in building student self-confidence, promoting healthy risk taking, and perseverance.

High Expectations Teaching can serve as a catalyst for educational equity by helping teachers uncover biases that hamper their effectiveness with struggling students. Case studies highlight experiences of teachers and administrators who worked to implement high expectations practices in their work with students and teachers. A series of original video clips provide depictions of strategies in action.

Through a partnership with Corwin Press, Learning Forward members can add the Book Club to their membership at any time and receive four books a year for \$69 (for U.S. mailing addresses). To receive this book, add the Book Club to your membership before January 15. For more information about this or any membership package, call 800-727-7288 or email [office@learningforward.org](mailto:office@learningforward.org).



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Learning Forward has implemented a new streamlined system for you to manage your membership and benefits. Here's how to access the new platform.

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- You will immediately receive an email with a link to set up your new password.
- Follow the link in the email to establish your new password.
- Use your email address and new password to log in.

If you encounter any problems logging in, contact the business office at 800-727-7288 or [office@learningforward.org](mailto:office@learningforward.org).

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### LEARNING FORWARD STAFF

#### Stephanie Hirsh

Executive director  
[stephanie.hirsh@learningforward.org](mailto:stephanie.hirsh@learningforward.org)

#### Frederick Brown

Deputy executive director  
[frederick.brown@learningforward.org](mailto:frederick.brown@learningforward.org)

#### Anthony Armstrong

Associate director of marketing  
[anthony.armstrong@learningforward.org](mailto:anthony.armstrong@learningforward.org)

#### Eric Celeste

Associate director of publications  
[eric.celeste@learningforward.org](mailto:eric.celeste@learningforward.org)

#### Tracy Crow

Director of communications  
[tracy.crow@learningforward.org](mailto:tracy.crow@learningforward.org)

#### Carrie Freundlich

Associate director of conferences and meetings  
[carrie.freundlich@learningforward.org](mailto:carrie.freundlich@learningforward.org)

#### Michael Lanham

Chief operating officer  
[michael.lanham@learningforward.org](mailto:michael.lanham@learningforward.org)

#### Michelle King

Associate director of communities  
[michelle.king@learningforward.org](mailto:michelle.king@learningforward.org)

#### Tom Manning

Associate director of consulting and networks  
[tom.manning@learningforward.org](mailto:tom.manning@learningforward.org)

#### Matt Rodriguez

Senior web developer  
[matt.rodriguez@learningforward.org](mailto:matt.rodriguez@learningforward.org)

#### Renee Taylor-Johnson

Associate director of business services  
[renee.taylor-johnson@learningforward.org](mailto:renee.taylor-johnson@learningforward.org)

#### Carol François

Learning ambassador  
[carol.francois@learningforward.org](mailto:carol.francois@learningforward.org)

#### Shirley Hord

Scholar laureate  
[shirley.hord@learningforward.org](mailto:shirley.hord@learningforward.org)

#### Joellen Killion

Senior advisor  
[joellen.killion@learningforward.org](mailto:joellen.killion@learningforward.org)

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# A brief look at Learning Forward projects in 3 states

Learning Forward is busy with projects in systems across the country. Here are some of the places where we are working with districts to improve professional learning and some of the programs we will be reporting on as implementation continues.

- This fall, Learning Forward launched a year-long engagement with Fort Bend (Texas) Independent School District to implement a new instructional coaching program. Along with supporting coaches and master teachers across the district, Learning Forward is also working with princi-

pals and district leaders in Fort Bend to ensure instructional coaching is a districtwide priority. Located southwest of Houston in one of the fastest-growing counties in the U.S., Fort Bend ISD serves 73,000 students.

- Learning Forward and the Utah State Board of Education have kicked off Year 2 of a five-year partnership to assess the quality of professional learning in the state. Teachers at every school in Utah are taking Learning Forward's Standards Assessment Inventory to provide input on their professional learning.

This data will be used to measure progress in the past year and inform recommendations to strengthen professional learning statewide.

- Stakeholders in Frederick County (Virginia) Public Schools are working with Learning Forward to develop a comprehensive, systemwide professional learning plan. This plan will provide the vision, infrastructure, and supports to ensure all educators in Frederick County work in a culture of continuous improvement and engage in professional learning that leads to great teaching and learning.

**STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION**  
(Required by 39 USC 3685)

- 1. Publication title:** *JSD*
- 2. Publication number:** ISSN 0276-928X
- 3. Filing date:** Dec. 1, 2016
- 4. Issue frequency:** Bimonthly
- 5. Number of issues published annually:** Six (6)
- 6. Annual subscription price:** \$89.00
- 7. Complete mailing address of known office of publication:** 504 S. Locust St., Oxford, OH 45056.  
**Contact person:** Leslie Miller. Telephone: (513) 523-6029
- 8. Complete mailing address of headquarters or general business office:** 504 S. Locust St., Oxford, OH 45056
- 9. Full name or complete mailing address of publisher, editor, and managing editor:**  
**Publisher:** Learning Forward, 504 S. Locust St., Oxford, OH 45056  
**Executive editor:** Tracy Crow, 674 Overbrook Dr., Columbus, OH 43214  
**Editor:** Eric Celeste, 17330 Preston Rd., Suite 106-D, Dallas, TX 75252
- 10. Owner:** Learning Forward, 504 S. Locust St., Oxford, OH 45056
- 11. Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities:** None.
- 12. Tax status:** Has not changed during preceding 12 months.
- 13. Publication title:** *JSD*
- 14. Issue date for circulation data below:** October 2016 (Vol. 37 No. 5)

**15. Extent and nature of circulation**

	Average number of copies of each issue during preceding 12 months	Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date
a. Total number of copies	5,147	4,659
b. Paid and/or requested circulation		
1. Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales (not mailed)	None	None
2. Paid or requested mail subscriptions (include advertisers proof copies and exchange copies)	4,491	4,177
c. Total paid and/or requested circulation	4,491	4,177
d. Free distribution by mail	287	272
e. Free distribution outside the mail	None	None
f. Total free distribution	287	272
g. Total distribution	4,779	4,449
Percent paid and/or requested circulation	94%	94%
h. Copies not distributed		
1. Office use, leftovers, spoiled	368	210
2. Returns from news agents	None	None
i. Total	5,147	4,659
Percent paid and/or requested circulation	87%	89%

**16. Publication of statement of ownership** will be printed in the December 2016 issue of this publication.

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## The power of thinking big.

By Eric Celeste

Communities of practice have become important tools for districts striving to improve teacher quality in a way that improves student outcomes, but scaling the benefits of these communities requires a more rigorous, intentional approach. That's why Learning Forward, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, created the Redesign PD Community of Practice — to add structure and support to the community of practice model, take it across systems, and use it to help large groups of educators wrestle with their most vexing concerns.

## 6 key features of a successful community of practice.

By Michelle King

Most educators probably know what it feels like to be part of an unproductive professional learning community. But there are ways to create strong communities of practice that allow

schools to address common challenges while also benefitting individual members. Successful communities have six specific characteristics that allow the experience to be rewarding for the members, the students they serve, and the education field in general.

## Goals: Coherence and relevance:

3 districts focus on quality of professional learning.

By Linda Jacobson

When many departments offer professional learning in a district and even at each individual school, it can be tough to ensure that the learning is high quality. But that's what teams from the Loudon County and Shelby County school districts in Tennessee and the Bridgeport Public Schools in Connecticut are working toward with new rubrics. As part of the Redesign PD Community of Practice, all three systems chose to work to build a professional learning system that is coherent and relevant to teachers, meaning that the

learning is useful, timely, and related to their practice in the classroom.

## Taking a measure of impact:

2 Colorado districts calibrate the effects of high-quality professional learning.

By Linda Jacobson

Snapshots of two Colorado districts in the Redesign PD Community of Practice: Denver Public Schools' professional learning partners help subject-matter experts and others provide educators with a high-quality learning experience. In Jefferson County, Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning guide educators to make teacher professional learning as useful as possible.

## Neighbors make great learning partners:

4 Texas districts work together to build strong professional learning systems.

By Kay Psencik, Steven Ebell, and Lisa V. McCulley

Four southeast Texas school districts

## Share your story

Learning Forward is eager to read manuscripts from educators at every level in every position. If your work includes a focus on effective professional learning, we want to hear your story.

JSD publishes a range of types of articles, including:

- **First-person accounts** of change efforts;
- **Practitioner-focused articles** about school- and district-level initiatives;
- **Program descriptions and results** from schools, districts, or external partners;
- **How-tos** from practitioners and thought leaders; and
- **Protocols and tools** with guidance on use and application.

To learn more about key topics and what reviewers look for in article submissions, visit [www.learningforward.com/publications/jsd/upcoming-themes](http://www.learningforward.com/publications/jsd/upcoming-themes).



## Write for JSD

- Themes are posted at [www.learningforward.org/publications/jsd/upcoming-themes](http://www.learningforward.org/publications/jsd/upcoming-themes).
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## INDEX OF ADVERTISERS

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National Education Association .....	5

are working together as part of a three-year initiative to improve professional learning in their districts. Clear Creek Independent School District, Friendswood Independent School District, Santa Fe Independent School District, and Galveston Independent School District became part of Galveston County Learning Leaders in spring 2015 when Learning Forward launched the project with a grant from the Houston Endowment. The community is based on the concept that districts benefit when they can share knowledge with each other.

#### **Creative tension:**

Turn the challenges of learning together into opportunities.

*By Christina L. Dobbs, Jacy Ippolito, and Megin Charner-Laird*

Participants in a high school literacy initiative grappled with and attempted new instructional practices designed to improve students' literacy skills over time. With regular opportunities to



interact around the work of improving literacy and learn to navigate the productive tensions that arose along the way, teachers not only found ideas for improving literacy instruction in their individual classrooms, but also came to agreement on new, shared instructional routines. Moreover, the strength of the collective work allowed the teams to then spread their practices to colleagues outside the project.

#### **Core practices fuel superintendents' equity focus.**

*By Scott Thompson*

The New Jersey Network of Superintendents is a community of practice with a tight focus on advancing equity through improvement of practice in the instructional core. The group's 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.

#### **Task mastery:**

A backward approach to designing instruction propels teaching forward.

*By Suzanne Simons*

Literacy Design Collaborative is a network of teachers committed to developing literacy-rich instruction in the content areas and building expertise from teacher to teacher. Within the Literacy Design Collaborative instructional design system, the task is the anchor for teacher work and student work. Co-designed with teachers, the system guides teachers in a backward design approach that helps teachers create tasks and, from there, strong instructional plans to teach the tasks.

## **features**

#### **Make evaluation count:**

To assess impact, know what to measure.

*By Amy Pendray and Jennifer Crockett*

How do educators at a systems level know that professional learning is impacting teacher practice in a way that leads to improved student outcomes? California's Long Beach Unified School District, a member of Learning Forward's Redesign PD Community of Practice, partnered with other districts from across the country to answer that question. As educators in the district clarified their understanding of evaluation and developed tools to better measure impact, partner districts provided critical and constructive feedback to help them refine their work.

#### **Foundations for success:**

Young people learn best through active and reflective experiences.

*By Jenny Nagaoka*

A report by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research describes the personal qualities that underlie a productive and fulfilling adulthood and the kind of experiences that adults can create for children to lead them there. These developmental experiences have two essential characteristics: They must be active, allowing students to design, create, practice, puzzle, experiment, and do. They must also be reflective, helping young people draw meaning from their experiences. *This article is sponsored by The Wallace Foundation.*

## **columns**

#### **Lessons from research:**

Instructional rounds contribute to communities of practice.

*By Joellen Killian*

Instructional rounds are a form of organizational routines among school and district administrators that contribute to establishing social networks within communities of practice to build a districtwide focus on instruction.

#### **From the director:**

How the Redesign PD Community of Practice can benefit you.

*By Stephanie Hirsh*

Consider three actions you can take now to impact teaching and learning in your system.



## How the Redesign PD Community of Practice can benefit you

The 22 districts participating in Learning Forward’s Redesign PD Community of Practice share our concerns that too few educators experience effective professional learning that will help them ensure all students succeed. As a result, too few students experience Learning Forward’s vision of excellent teaching and learning every day.

The districts agreed to participate in a “ruthless assessment” of their current state, and the findings probably will not surprise you: too many failed attempts at professional learning, fragmentation and silos of practice, and few attempts to measure the effectiveness of their work. From this, the group developed two problems of practice, and each district team thoroughly embraced one or the other. Each team’s goal is to find a solution that not only impacts its system but also could inform the work of colleagues everywhere.

Their goals are bold, and their actions align to that. They are asking hard questions and taking steps previously untried. I am confident they will significantly move the needle on these two long-standing challenges. In the meantime, there are some facets of this work that will benefit all of us. Here are three actions you can take immediately.

•  
**Stephanie Hirsh ([stephanie.hirsh@learningforward.org](mailto:stephanie.hirsh@learningforward.org)) is executive director of Learning Forward.**

### **Study communities of practice to learn what makes them unique.**

You may think you already understand them because you are part of a professional learning community or some other network, but there are elements of a community of practice that can add substantive value to these learning designs. One element in particular is the focus on a shared problem rather than working alongside other professionals for support as you work on your own problems. This shared focus accelerates the process and deepens the implementation of the solutions. Try it.

### **Don’t skip the “learning.”**

In our study and development of this community of practice, we needed to elevate the “learning” steps. I was reminded again of one of my favorite sayings: Shared ignorance does not create powerful plans. For each step you take toward potential solutions to your problems, you will find guidance from research, best practices, and information from other fields. Intentional learning focused on a problem of practice is what distinguishes Learning Forward’s work from others. I am convinced it will be the hallmark of a successful community of practice.

### **Enroll in a community of practice.**

Watch for opportunities next year to enlist your system or school in one of ours. Perhaps you are thinking about enrolling in the Learning Forward



Academy, which will transition to a community of practice model. Perhaps you want to launch your own in your school system or find one sponsored by another hub. The experiences reflected in the articles in this issue of *JSD* illustrate how to make that happen — and we are here to help if you get stuck. We will continue to look for ways you can experience this powerful learning design.

To get started, study the Redesign PD Community Cycle of Inquiry at [www.learningforward.org/learning-opportunities/redesign-pd-community-of-practice/cycle-of-inquiry](http://www.learningforward.org/learning-opportunities/redesign-pd-community-of-practice/cycle-of-inquiry). Use this resource to determine if your PLCs or other learning structures are paying equal attention to all the significant steps and responsibilities. From there, you will be off to a good start.

Learning Forward will continue to provide free resources and support to help you on this journey. We appreciate the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s ongoing support of this work. ■



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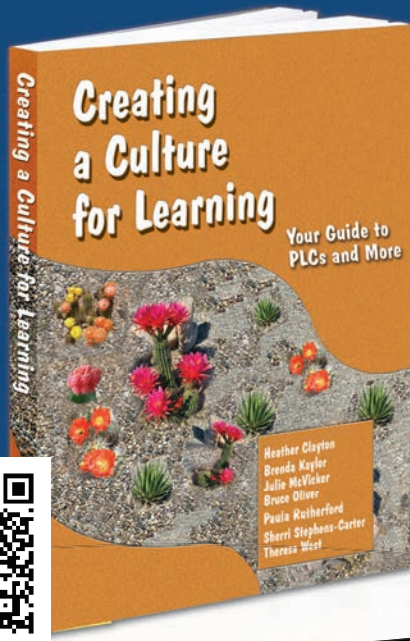
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- How can schools best use data to inform practice?
- What are the non-negotiables in such schools?



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