TOOLS

A NEW PARADIGM FOR
COLLABORATION

BY ROHINI McKEE AND MICHELLE BOWMAN

Learning communities provide unique opportunities for discussion, reflection, and growth. This is one of the reasons collaborative learning networks have been a focus of Learning Forward's work for decades.

In the past year, COVID-19 has presented many new challenges for educators, not only in teaching and connecting with students but in their own learning from one another. The necessity of physical distancing has required all of us who engage in networks to be nimble and adapt our strategies to an online environment.

Although frustrating, this need can be turned into opportunities to productively change the way we work. Now is the time to redefine not just how students learn, but also how we as educators create systems and processes to better support adult learning, collaboration, and collective impact. We can double down on the "why" of engaging in networked improvement efforts to benefit students, families, and communities.

That is the philosophy of the Texas Network for School Improvement (TxNSI) Hub, a collaboration among Learning Forward, Educate Texas, and the Dana Center to enhance middle school educational opportunities, especially in math. The hub supports a network of Texas schools working to increase the percentage of Black, Latinx, and middle schoolers experiencing poverty who are academically and behaviorally on track to graduate high school ready for college and career success. The hub focuses on supporting schools to use continuous improvement processes to accelerate equitable changes.

We believe that those processes can still thrive in the unexpectedly virtual world in which we now find ourselves. To understand how, Michelle Bowman, Learning Forward's vice president, networks & content design, recently participated in a panel discussion about the pivots needed to support learning in an online setting. The other panelists were Ryan Gallagher, director of continuous improvement at High Tech High in San Diego,

California, and Karen Zeribi, founder and executive director of Shift, which uses improvement science and human-centered design to support systems change.

To continue the learning from the panel, convening partner Catalyst:Ed developed the report *A New Paradigm for Collaboration: Virtual Network Support* to capture the lessons from network leaders on facilitating virtual network support and collaboration through an equity lens. The tool on the following pages is based on that report.

As we stressed during the panel and in the report, it is essential to embed equity throughout the work of continuous improvement, whether in person or online. Having difficult conversations about race and equity was already daunting in person. The addition of the remote setting can seem like an insurmountable barrier.

However, given the demands of a global pandemic, the disparate impact this has on people of color and communities experiencing poverty, and the systemic racism that underlies that
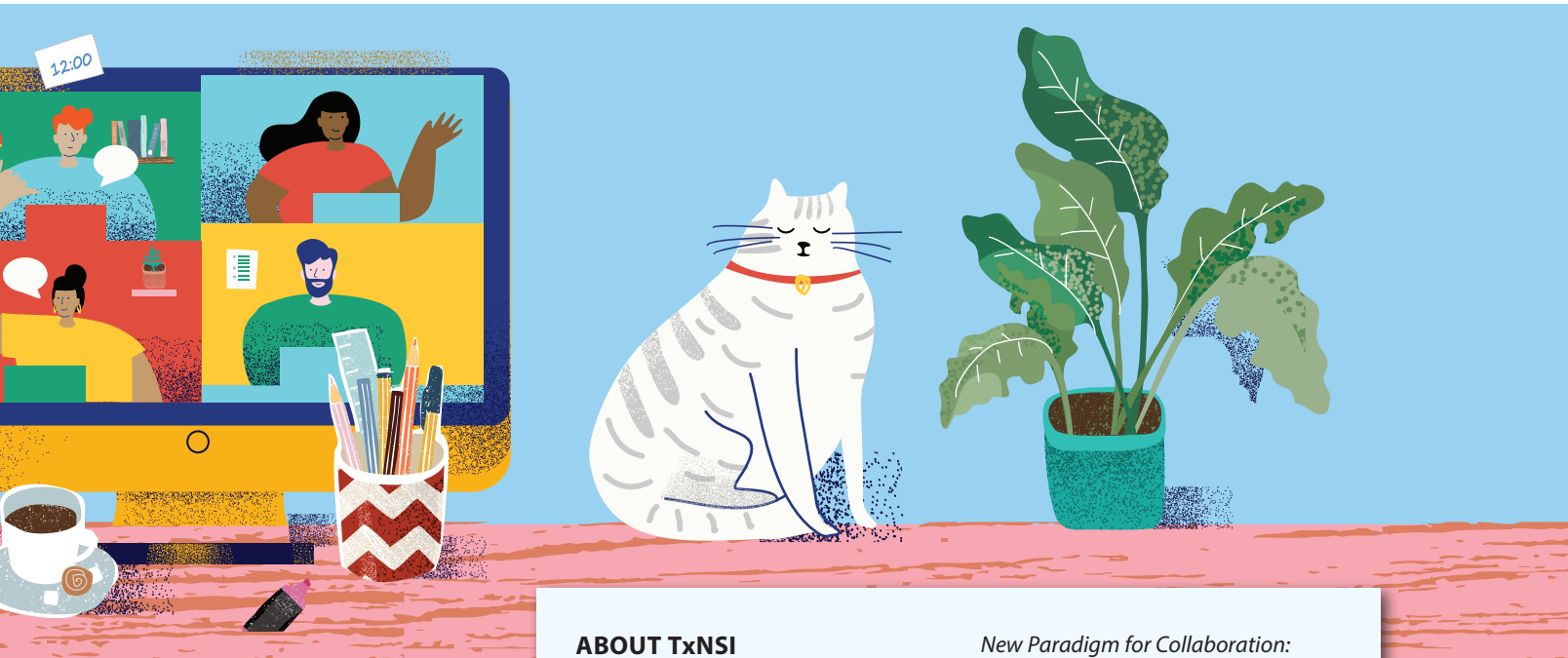
impact, we must ensure that we are having these conversations, even if we have to have them in a virtual space. Now is the time to open our eyes to differences, take time to acknowledge and appreciate them, and learn from them.

You can use the tools here to create an online space that makes it possible to focus on continuous improvement with an equity lens.

We encourage users of the tools to keep in mind a comment Bowman made during the panel discussion: "We need to go slow to go fast." It takes time to build relationships, establish trust, and support one another. Taking that time will allow long-term progress and ongoing continuous improvement.

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ABOUT TxNSI AND ITS PARTNERS

TxNSI is one of 30 improvement networks nationwide to receive the Network for School Improvement grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. With this grant, we are able to connect with similar organizations, share and learn new strategies, and access high-quality technical assistance providers to deepen the work — a great benefit, especially as COVID-19 changes the needs of our students and families and the way we can support them.

Each member of the collaborative brings unique strengths to the partnership: Educate Texas serves as the network convener and provides analytical support, Learning Forward brings its expertise in professional learning and continuous improvement, and the Dana Center provides subject matter expertise and technical assistance around mathematics education and equitable student success.

Catalyst:Ed, which wrote *A New Paradigm for Collaboration: Virtual Network Support* based on the continuous improvement panel, draws on education leaders' collective expertise to help them innovate, excel, and scale to deliver breakthrough results for all students. To accomplish this, Catalyst:Ed:

- Builds and activates diverse networks of expert talent vital to the health and impact of education organizations;

- Connects education leaders with the right expert support to spark innovation and build capacity;

- Creates shared resource pools that all organizations can benefit from; and

- Disseminates critical information to build knowledge, while fostering greater accountability and a focus on results.

Learn more at **www.catalyst-ed.org.** To read the report on which this tool is based, see **bit. ly/3eSfa6y.**

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Virtual network support tool

This tool helps network leaders plan for and implement techniques for engaging collaboration in virtual settings. Before your next virtual gathering, consider the tips and discussion items here and record your reflections. You may wish to note the items you have already incorporated and how well they worked, those you wish to try and what you need to do to implement them, and those you haven't yet considered and first steps for applying them. You may also wish to add your own strategies.

1. MAXIMIZE ENGAGEMENT IN LARGE-GROUP VIRTUAL SETTINGS

Key consideration	Strategies	Reflections and additional strategies
Know your audience: Remember that people may surprise you.	• **Consider time zones** and don't assume traditional business hours work best for participants. • **Encourage turning video on** but don't make it mandatory as sometimes people may not be comfortable or able to at the time. • **Understand that virtual meeting fatigue is a real experience** and plan frequent breaks. • **Plan varied forms of interactivity** to engage all types of learners and sharers.	
Leverage familiar routines: Build comfort to increase connection.	• **Engage participants with platform features,** such as the thumbs up or high five reactions. • **Record collaboration in living documents** to share strategies, crowdsource emerging ideas, or capture notes and next steps. • **Use real-time polling features.** • **Use online breakout rooms** to host deeper discussions in a smaller environment.	
Differentiate for tech savviness: Cultivate genuine engagement.	• **Set up and lead with virtual meeting norms.** • **Teach people how to use a virtual background** if they don't want others seeing into their home office. • **Have a dedicated team member add "tech support"** to their screen name so participants know to whom they can direct questions. • **Send a document with a list of the tech tools** that will be used before the meeting and contact info for tech help.	
Prioritize dry runs: Practice to avoid the avoidable.	• **Identify roles and responsibilities** for each team member and have a backup person for each role. Specific roles include presenter, breakout room coordinator, and chat monitor. • **Rehearse the content** and roles several times with each person. • **Establish breakout groups in advance** with the understanding that attendance may change and adjustments will be required.	
Focus your time with wraparound supports: Maximize your time and extend the learning.	• **Consider materials to read ahead of time** so all attendees can join the discussion with baseline knowledge. • **Provide communications that outline "know before you go" information** along with the meeting agenda. • **Maintain transparency** in your communication regarding goals, strategies, and updates.	

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Virtual network support tool CONTINUED

2. FOCUS ON CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT		

Strategy	Tips	Questions or discussion prompts
Remind people often why they are using continuous improvement to solve current problems.	• This is a prime time for rapid-cycle experimentation as you test how students learn in a virtual setting. • Through continuous improvement practices, you can share with your colleagues which strategies are working and which are not. • De-emphasize the tools of improvement and simplify the approach to continuous improvement.	
Return to root causes that drive your continuous improvement work and network aim.	• Use empathy interviews to draw out lived experiences. (See the tool for conducting empathy interviews in the October 2020 issue of *The Learning Professional*.) • With the world changing so frequently, continue to revisit your root causes to make sure your strategies are still meeting the needs of your network members.	
Engage in cross-network or cross-grade learning sessions.	• Given that whole-network convenings do not look the same right now, be intentional on how you engage your network members. Consider smaller group settings to share learnings.	
Leverage partnerships from district leaders or other support organizations to give teachers more time for deeper thinking.	• When possible, take on some of the continuous improvement work at the network level. An example of this is completing the plan-do-study-act (PDSA) document that a teacher may normally be responsible for.	
Use virtual visual organizing tools for capturing strategies, results, and takeaways.	• Use tools that teachers have easy access to and can review if they have to leave the meeting early. • Encourage people to add updates, new questions, or discussion topics in the tool before the meeting so everyone can come prepared.	

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Virtual network support tool CONTINUED

3. CONSIDER CONTEXT

Understanding the context in which your network members operate is important for any successful effort. Articulating your starting place will not only help you plan but will help you share your learning with others.	
Who are the members of your network? (You don't need to list names. Roles or general descriptions are sufficient.)	
How often will you be convening network members and what platform will you use?	
What is the problem of practice you are addressing?	
What do you anticipate as the major challenges to your virtual convening(s)?	

4. TOOLS FOR SHARED LEARNING

The following list of platforms is meant to help you research the best tools for you. You may wish to add your own ideas to this list.		
TOOL TYPE	TOOL NAMES	TOOL PURPOSES
Virtual meeting tools	Zoom, WebEx, MS Teams, Shindig, Remo, Swapcard, On24	To hold online meetings. Some allow for participant agency in breakouts and small groups.
Polling software	Zoom, PollEverywhere, Menti	Gather real-time information from participants.
Project management	SmartSheet, Monday, Asana	Online project management system, allows for collaborative managing of timelines, processes, and project details.
Material management	JotForm, Nearpod, Google	Allows presenters to upload materials they would like to add to session descriptions and automatically saves them in Dropbox folder for processing.
Online messaging platforms	Slack, Facebook, Khoros, Remind, FlipGrid, CrowdCompass	Allows communication channels across teams. Peer-to-peer (referenced below) offers specific guidelines for tools.
Scheduling tools	YouCanBook.me, Calendly, Doodle	Scheduling software.
Collaborative boards and sharing	Mural, Padlet, Trello, Scrumblr	Digital workspace that allows templates to scaffold meetings and shared virtual whiteboards.
Community building templates	Peer-to-Peer Toolbox	Toolbox with templates for virtual community building strategies and frameworks.