



NETWORKS AT WORK
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Member districts will address shared problems of practice in a collaborative environment fueled by rapid inquiry cycles to test ideas and document improvement.

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NETWORK ADVANCES CURRICULUM-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The value and promise of teaching with high-quality instructional materials has been well-documented, but research suggests that good curricula can only do so much to advance student learning. High-quality curriculum-based professional learning is required to realize its potential (Chu et al., 2022). Diverse stakeholders must work together to produce improved professional learning that strengthens educational experiences and outcomes for students.

Learning Forward's new Curriculum-Based Professional Learning network aims to do just that. The network provides member districts with an opportunity to work collaboratively with Learning Forward to advance the use of curriculum-based professional learning to implement and scale instructional practices that positively affect equitable student outcomes. This improvement network provides a research-informed structure to organize learning and address shared problems of practice in a collaborative environment fueled by rapid inquiry cycles to test ideas and document improvement.



The need for this network is underscored by the fact that the field of curriculum-based professional learning is promising but still emerging, with impact not yet consistently felt across the education ecosystem and a need for focused attention to resources, actors, and the evolving knowledge base (Chu et al., 2022).

The network is grounded in two premises. First, curriculum launch or implementation without tightly aligned professional learning can lead to content gaps from one grade to the next, lessons targeted at the wrong level, and ineffective differentiated support for students. Second, to effectively implement a high-quality instructional model with integrity, educators need a supportive, coherent professional learning system that is aligned with Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022). Alignment to the standards will ensure that professional learning is coherent, job-embedded, relevant to educators' day-to-day work, and addresses critical issues affecting all students' learning and achievement.

The network's district partners for the 2023-24 school year include the School District of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland; and Metro Nashville Public Schools, Tennessee. The member districts are all in early phases of implementing Illustrative Mathematics at the middle school level. Each member district will engage a core team of cross-role district- and school-based leaders from two to three middle schools reflecting the diversity of the district's student population.

With funding from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the network will meet throughout the school year for in-person and virtual convenings, virtual coaching sessions, and professional learning webinars. The teams will use Learning Forward's well-established continuous improvement strategies and active learning grounded in Standards for Professional Learning. They will test evidence-based actions and collect immediate and practical data to inform decisions and

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catalyze the next iteration of a change. They will use change management tools and resources that help leaders create effective professional learning policies and in the service of improved teaching practices and changes in student learning and achievement. Resources such as *The Elements: Transforming Teaching Through Curriculum-Based Professional Learning* (Short & Hirsh, 2022), the network’s research and tools, and Learning Forward tools aligned to Standards for Professional Learning will undergird participants’ learning.

Districts in the network will:

- Share promising practices that

support curriculum-based professional learning.

- Co-produce solutions regarding the implementation of high-quality instructional materials.
- Network with role-alike professionals and gain additional perspectives to support teacher teams and student outcomes.
- Gain additional perspectives on challenges and opportunities.

By working collaboratively, sharing knowledge, and engaging together in learning and problem-solving, they will make progress on a shared problem of practice to improve student learning in

math through the combination of high-quality curriculum and high-quality teaching practices that are aligned to it.

REFERENCES

Chu, E., McCarty, G., Gurny, M., & Madhani, M. (2022). *Curriculum-based professional learning: The state of the field.* Center for Public Research and Leadership, Columbia University.

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Short, J. & Hirsh, S. (2022). *The elements: Transforming teaching through curriculum-based professional learning.* Corwin. ■

Coaches can also encourage and support teachers to collect the data. For example, to foster a holistic approach beyond data that can be quantified, I’ve encouraged teachers to collect open-ended responses from students at the end of a lesson, such as asking them to write about what they learned.

Observing and collecting data allows us to understand the buds we are tending and what they need so we can tailor our efforts to improve engagement and comprehension and help students blossom.

INVITE OTHERS TO HELP SPREAD SEEDS

As Miss Rumphius discovered, even dedicated gardeners can use a little help. Some of my most successful coaching cycles started with others planting the initial seeds. For example, a supportive school principal I worked with understood coaching and embodied many of its principles when working with teachers. Because he deeply understood each teacher’s goals, he could provide them with various options for the next steps, including

highlighting how my coaching could support them in achieving their goal. Teachers, recognizing the value of this guidance, soon realized that working with a coach was like having a skilled gardener by their side. It became evident that coaching was a time-saving approach, sparing them the effort of figuring things out independently and instead nurturing their growth efficiently.

NURTURE, DON'T CONTROL

One of the valuable lessons I learned early in my coaching journey was understanding that my role wasn’t to force teachers into teaching the way I did. Like a unique plant, each teacher possesses their strengths and challenges, and they need different supports and nutrients to nurture students in their distinctive manner. When I shifted my approach from “here is something I did” to focusing on the teacher and their specific circumstances with students, coaching became a more meaningful and appreciated practice.

And, as in a garden, we can’t control the outcome — we can only

provide the care and attention that maximize the chances of growth. I discovered that coaching thrives when it is a natural response to a recognized need. Teachers benefit most when they willingly embrace coaching because they understand its value.

Instead of rushing toward the teachers I initially thought needed improvement, I started seeking out those teachers who were eager to grow. Interestingly, this approach often led to indirect seed planting, as other teachers observed the positive outcomes of our collaborative work and became interested in participating.

With these tips in mind, being an instructional coach can be very similar — and similarly rewarding — to being a gardener. It involves focusing on growth and progress, nurturing the growing process with care and attention, adapting to the evolving landscape, learning from challenges and unsuccessful experiments, practicing patience, and celebrating successes.

Let’s plant the seeds of success together, and may this year’s harvest be bountiful and fulfilling for all. ■