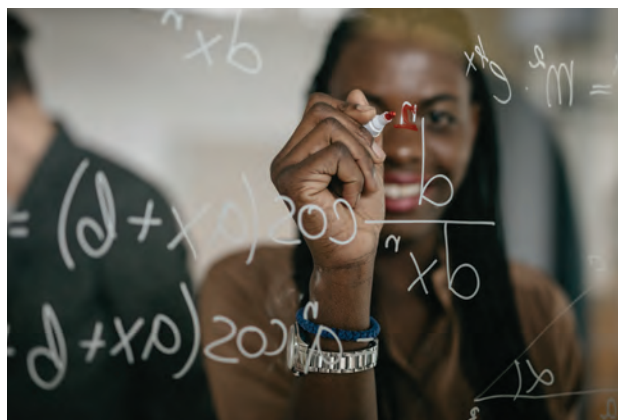




EDUCATORS ENGAGE WITH CURRICULUM AS LEARNERS

Throughout October, three districts kicked off their participation in Learning Forward’s Curriculum-Based Professional Learning Network. Teams of math teachers, math instructional coaches, principals, and district leaders collaborated with Learning Forward to begin strengthening the implementation of the Illustrative Math curriculum for their districts’ middle schools. Putting themselves in the roles of both students and teachers, they began to shift their practices and plan for a process of ongoing improvement.

As we described in the last issue of *The Learning Professional* (Bowman, 2023), network members — the School District of Philadelphia (Pennsylvania), Montgomery County (Maryland) Public Schools, and Metro Nashville (Tennessee) Public Schools — are working to improve the way they support teachers to



use their relatively new math curriculum. This means moving beyond typical silos that separate curriculum and professional learning departments and shifting from workshop sessions to job-embedded professional learning centered on high-quality instructional materials.

In the Curriculum-Based Professional Learning Network, teachers experience the same kind of inquiry-based learning we expect them to provide for their students. Engaging with the curriculum as active learners supports teachers to change their instructional practices, test new ways of approaching content, and challenge their beliefs. Immersing teachers in the curriculum as students is a valuable learning model to transform practice, especially in the early phase of curriculum use (Klein & Riordan, 2011; Loucks-Horsley et al., 2003; Short & Hirsh, 2021).

During the kickoff meetings, district teams spent two full days with Learning Forward’s networks team, learning about improvement methods and math instructional practices. Network participants became 7th-grade math students, exploring how to understand and develop scaled replicas of an American flag as they experienced an Illustrative Math unit on proportional relationships and percentages. They talked together about what “scaled versions” means, how and why to increase and decrease percentages, and how some of us may have forgotten how to multiply fractions. These “7th graders” then shared with the class how they took a standard-sized flag and created a scaled version for a stamp or a space shuttle. Participants then stepped out of the student role to make observations about the “teacher’s” facilitation, including supporting questioning, productive struggles with the content, and collaborative meaning-making.

Grounded in classroom teachers’ input about their day-to-day experiences with implementing the middle school Illustrative Math curriculum, teams also explored strategies and change ideas related to their own context — things like focusing student dialogue on mathematical language, engaging student learners with a range of prior experiences, and the challenge of maintaining the desired pace of instruction when faced with fire drills, assemblies, and other unexpected interruptions.

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Around the same time, one of my mentors shared a phrase that I repeated to myself my entire first year: “Feedback is my friend.” I did not have formal training in professional learning, and I knew that becoming a good facilitator would require study and intentionality. The feedback mantra became an affirmation that enabled me to seek all forms of feedback and use them to continue refining my practice. I have continued to take that mentor’s advice to heart, and I encourage other professional learning facilitators to do the same.

In 2021, I conducted doctoral research on professional learning for

educators working toward educational, racial, and social justice. I examined what educators want and need, and the findings are illuminating for facilitators:

- All educators, regardless of how long they have taught, arrive with expertise that should be honored.
- There is a desire for community in which educators can improve their practice and impact the outcomes of their students.
- Facilitators don’t have to have all the answers. Educators value a collaborative facilitation style and authentic leadership. It’s especially important now for

us to listen to these lessons and lead accordingly. With the introduction of artificial intelligence in education, the pace of change over the next five years is likely to move faster than ever. As expectations of educators and students change, it can feel daunting to keep up, especially if one chooses to go it alone. So I suggest we hang on to each other and listen to each other. As leaders of adult learning, we have a responsibility to support educators in all phases of their careers and in all the needs they bring. If we remain open and responsive, we can continue to work together for the advancement of the profession. ■

NETWORKS AT WORK / Elizabeth Foster

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During the kickoff meetings, participants also learned about continuous improvement strategies. They dug into plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycle planning and engaged in structured conversations to narrow the focus of the problem they want to solve, generate change ideas, and begin planning for an inquiry cycle. They learned how their change cycles yield data that can help them decide whether to adopt the change going forward, adapt the idea or strategy and retest, or abandon an idea that seemed promising but did not yield any improvement. Over time, multiple PDSA cycles build a body of evidence about what works, especially when there are multiple teams in each district and multiple districts in a network, as there are in the network.

As with the math content, participants explored these continuous improvement strategies in interactive, experiential ways. For example, to practice PDSA cycles, teams worked together in an iterative process to assemble a toy. As they did so, they talked about how small-scale changes

can impact the desired outcome and how important it is to articulate your prediction for how the change might improve the outcome and reflect on what actually happened so you can learn and adjust for future cycles. Calling on *Learning to Improve* (Bryk, 2015), the Learning Forward Networks team emphasized the value in learning from clearly identified change ideas, failing quickly if you are going to fail, and documenting what the team is learning along the way so that hindsight does not cloud anyone’s perception of what happened.

Each team is now receiving frequent technical assistance and support from the Learning Forward Networks team, as well as virtual opportunities to discuss and learn from the other participating districts. All of the district teams came together at a full-day session at the Learning Forward Annual Conference to share data and reflections from their PDSA cycles, discuss what they are learning, and have role-alike conversations with educators from other districts in addition to collaborative work time with their own

teams. The district teams are already poised to make important contributions to the emerging field of curriculum-based professional learning.

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