

# NETWORKED LEARNING: IMPROVING PRINCIPAL PRACTICE

Focus Area: **School Leadership**

Partnership Dates: **2017–2020**

## Introduction & Alum Rock Union Elementary School District

The Alum Rock Union Elementary School District (ARUSD) sits in the East Side of San Jose, California, serving just under 11,000 students, and is comprised of fifteen elementary, three TK–8, and seven middle schools. NTC initially partnered with ARUSD to develop new teacher mentors and instructional coaches. In 2017–2018, NTC broadened its partnership with ARUSD to include all principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches, as well as the academic services team that support the schools. This partnership with ARUSD has brought greater coherence to the systems that support schools and its school leaders through collaborative networks of learning.

### There are two primary challenges that ARUSD faces:

- **Continually declining enrollment:** Since 2010, the district has experienced declining enrollment, which has resulted in resource challenges, budgetary restrictions, and staffing shortages.
- **Because of constrained resources, meeting every students' needs, remains a key challenge.** While the Alum Rock census area has a poverty rate of about 9.25%, over 80% of Alum Rock students qualify for free/reduced lunch. Additionally, about 40% of students are English language learners. And, up to 11% within the district are considered special needs.



# Building Collaborative Learning Networks

The research on professional learning networks outlines three core tasks that must occur in order to cause system-level change:

- 1** The network must look to solving shared problems of practice focused on more equitable outcomes for students.
- 2** The network should work to generate new knowledge—learning and innovating together to push each other’s thinking.
- 3** The network should share their collective expertise—knowledge will then become common and help inform the work, as a whole.

Taking this approach, NTC worked to maximize the District’s strongest asset: their staff. And, subsequently created cohesive networks of school leaders. School leaders collectively hold the knowledge and expertise necessary to disrupt deeply embedded inequities. However, what they often lack is time, space, and platforms for connecting with a network of colleagues. These resources are essential to unlock that collective potential as is the actual work that happens within these networks.

NTC supported ARUSD’s shift from a traditional professional support structure focused on compliance to a more responsive system that meets the adaptive challenges of schools to meet all students’ needs.



## Support Implementation/In Partnership: ARUSD & NTC



**Locate** current school practice with common framework



Develop a **roadmap** with a vision and strategy for success



Develop a path to success using the **GPS** tool and data



Evaluate and **celebrate** to define next level of work

## Enacting Change Using the “Roadmap” as a Guide

As every school leader aims to enact change, there must be a distinct focus on planning and reflection in how change can be implemented from school to school. It is critical to encourage each school leader within the cohort to interpret and apply their learning through varied strategies and tactics. This is accomplished through each school leader developing a “Roadmap.” The components of the Roadmap are an Instructional Vision; one to two narrow-focused outcomes; and a “Theory of Change” with success metrics. Each of these components are filtered through personalized feedback and coaching from NTC and then utilized to form the networks. Through completing the Roadmap and then sharing it with their networks, leaders are equipped to clearly communicate and translate their clarified thinking to practice. For example, many leaders within the Achieving Leaders Effective Schools (ALES) programs’ utilize the Roadmap to promote a shared approach across an Instructional Leadership Team—and, ultimately create collaboration within their networks and cohesiveness at the school level.

NTC developed these solutions in conjunction with ARUSD through feedback from the cohort support team and refined the model through co-facilitation, data analysis, and deep stakeholder involvement.

### NTC encouraged:

- **Ongoing communication**
- **Attention to resources available**
- **Data and accountability**
- **Collective ownership of work**
- **Shared commitment to a future transformed**

Through monthly seminars, school leaders are generating new knowledge by building their skills to implement instructional coaching and leading instructional leadership teams. ARUSD school leaders are also learning to engage with each other to solve shared and individual problems. In ARUSD, there is continuous support to implement some of the following: observation schedules, coordination with instructional leadership teams for professional learning opportunities for teachers, and even, addressing challenging school culture and discipline issues.

# Creating a Common Experience of Effectiveness: In-Field Networks

In addition to seminar sessions, opportunities for networked learning at school sites are provided, known as the In-Field Network. This provides an opportunity for the site leader to provide color and context on the efforts in action and for small, nimble leadership groups to solve common problems of practice, together.

In-Field Networks were piloted in the first year of the program with ARUSD, with only a subset of schools participating. In the program's second year (AY 18–19), every school within the ARUSD elementary school network participated in either hosting or attending. Fifteen of the twenty-five schools hosted their colleagues, and district leadership began to facilitate the In Field Networks, subsequently building valuable capacity for future professional learning.

## Positive Transformation as an Early Result

With a focus on networked professional learning for school sites, leaders are able to deepen their articulation of their school-level strategy through the Roadmap and identify key action steps to receive feedback from their network. Also, school sites that share instructional staff realize that by collaborating with school leaders with similar staffing structures, they could identify new and deepened ways to support educators. School leaders, coached by NTC, are able to identify how to leverage district instructional coaches in support of school priorities.

### Program Model



**ILPLC  
(INSTRUCTIONAL  
LEADERS PLC)**

- Monthly sessions co-facilitated by ARUSD & NTC. Consists of principals, vice principals, coaches, and academic services team.
- Develop, monitor and refine Theory of Change.



**IN-FIELD  
NETWORKS**

- 3–4 sessions/year facilitated by academic services and NTC.
- Consists of principals, vice principals, coaches, and academic services team.
- Provide an opportunity for a single site to share their Theory of Change efforts, open their classrooms, and receive feedback to move work forward.

Early results of NTC’s partnership with ARUSD elementary and middle school networks point to a positive transformation. Specifically:



Site leaders are expressing a greater willingness to analyze classroom practice and observe how standards-aligned instruction is implemented and practiced through multiple modes of analysis, including student work and each school’s instructional culture.

But, most promising, school supports in ARUSD have moved from “one size fits all” professional learning to more personalized

supports that demonstrate greater, lasting impacts on learning environments. NTC has continues to refine the problem of practice development so that it’s representative to the site and grounded in actionable data from a variety of sources, including but not limited to: attendance, suspension rates, classroom instruction, curriculum, and assessments.

## Key Takeaways and Looking Ahead for ARUSD

The partnership continues into the 19–20 school year with NTC and ARUSD with these key takeaways as the anchor:



Differentiated professional learning improves principals skills



Schools are the unit of change, leaders are the lever of change



Networks are powerful tools to solve common problems of practice



Specific district needs must be at the core of the work

Moving forward the work will focus on working with the District’s academic services team as thought partners to help further develop, create, curate, and implement into the instructional leadership communities.