LEADERSHIP NETWORKS

THE POWER OF PEERS

Adam Parrott-Sheffer
David Herrera
Colleen Oliver
“What barriers do you anticipate to your new walkthrough routine?” asks a principal to a peer during a monthly leadership meeting. “Besides time?” the leader responds with a bit of knowing and nervous laughter. “I am not yet sure I know how to keep it sustainable.”

Other leaders in the group of five principals ask more probing questions as the leader whose problem they have spent the last ten minutes interrogating writes down insights into gaps in the initial plan. These questions surface additional nuance into how the leader might approach focusing his school community on rigor as defined within the Common Core State Standards—a goal the school community and leadership team committed to for the year. The conversation closes with each member of the conversation offering one suggestion based upon the implementation gaps raised and their own experiences with school improvement and change management.

It is a theory for school and system change rooted in the premise that schools are the unit of change and leaders, by supporting and developing those with the greatest impact on learning—teachers, are the lever for change. Networks are how leaders build the capacity and have support for implementation in order to enact that change.

For the past two years, we have been engaging systems and school leaders in these sorts of conversations in order to transform the role of the principal by launching and sustaining networks. This work, with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation, and the Stuart Foundation, builds upon over twenty years of experience at the New Teacher Center supporting teachers and instructional leaders through collaborative developmental practice in service of standards-based instruction. The initial results from this field test in two districts have been promising with increases in leader collaboration, knowledge of strategies with the highest impact on learning and improved implementation of whole school change efforts. In an era where half of leaders leave within three years, we have found that networks of leaders can be a vehicle for substantial student success and social justice in a sustainable structure.

**WHAT IS A NETWORK?**

Peer networks are smaller groups of 4–6 leaders within a larger leadership network comprised of 3–8 peer networks. They meet monthly to dive deeper into the learning as a group of leaders that will get to know each member school’s context and goals as well as the leader’s developmental needs at a level that allows them to provide more meaningful feedback to support deep professional and organizational growth. In our model, members of the network also are taught to provide each other feedback throughout the month on high impact strategies for leading schools. These include creating an optimal learning culture, aligning instruction to standards that target the instructional core, coaching for results through content-based feedback, and leveraging Instructional Leadership Teams to share responsibility and magnify impact.
WHY NETWORKS

Developing the capacity of leaders to enact change that creates substantial student success and social justice can only happen at scale through intentional collaboration. It is by increasing the number of excellent schools and tightening the bonds between them that systems level change and districts that truly transform outcomes for kids become possible.

We know that the most effective leaders connect with other leaders who are engaged in similar work and addressing similar complex problems. They leverage these relationships to identify and deepen their knowledge of promising practices and share successes and failures so that future efforts can improve learning faster (Big Thinkers Society, 2018). However, in too many systems these efforts are left to the motivation of individual leaders—a reality that creates large barriers to entry and makes student success dependent on the idiosyncratic beliefs of independent leaders.

Our experience from our field tests demonstrates the idea that networked leadership can be utilized as a district-wide strategy. Networked learning can make the sharing of effective leadership practices an intentional improvement effort for school leaders.

WHAT HAPPENS IN A NETWORK

Significant attention must be paid to the formation of principal networks in order to lay the foundation for high performance and sustainability. First, the network must be oriented to the work with a clear identity, purpose, and membership for the team. Then, time must be spent to build trust where reliability and candor are established. These relationships provide a context where goals can be clarified through a shared vision and the network can commit to the work (Drexler, 1988).
Over time, this process builds a network where school leaders intentionally leverage their expertise. These leaders learn from each other’s past experience and current efforts and also learn with each other by building new knowledge through their experimentation. They also learn on behalf of larger school-based teams with whom they will share the work of the network. It is this sharing and generation of practice that allows the network to be greater than the sum of its parts (Jackson & Temperley, 2007).

Networked leaders generate new knowledge through their participation in the process. This knowledge informs and adjusts their professional and instructional vision for their school community. Building knowledge about how learning occurs in students and adults is a key focal point of the network. However, transferring that knowledge to the task of improving schools requires the creation of knowledge about both leadership and change management.

The synthesis of expertise and knowledge generation provides an opportunity for leaders to collaboratively solve urgent problems of practice that address inequity as a root cause. Leaders support each other through inquiry to define their problems and to provide enough specificity in order to identify root causes and to make the problem actionable. The network then drills into the plan so that there is a step-by-step process for implementation. With clarity achieved, the network then provides its most useful functions. First, it provides vetting for the plan by probing possible misconceptions, barriers to implementation, resources needed, and a definition and/or evidence for what success looks like. Second, the network supports implementation by sharing strategies implemented in the past and by offering resources and suggestions based upon experience.

**FORWARD PRESS** is a protocol leaders use in networks to clarify thinking. It involves four steps:

- **Inquire.** What is your leadership goal? What action do you plan to take? Be Specific.
- **Drill.** What are some “how to” steps you can take for this action? How do you…? What else…?
- **Probe.** What resources do you need to identify or develop? What artifacts can you bring to the next meeting to document implementation?
- **Support.** One suggestion I have is… I wonder what would happen if…?

**LOOKING BACK** is a protocol leaders use in networks to capture learning from implementing tactics and strategies each month.

- **Focus.** With respect to your progress on your strategy what feedback would you like to get from this conversation?
- **Assess.** What outcomes or data do you have towards your strategy? How confident are you about your conclusions about the data?
- **Revise.** What are some possible modifications you could make to address obstacles?
- **Support.** I wonder what would happen if…? Something I have tried with success on my campus is…
In short, the network allows leaders to increase the likelihood of success by preventing predictable challenges and by providing a space to test out solutions generated by the best expertise of the group. It also provides supported accountability as leaders update the network on the roll out of the solution informed by reality and the constraints of implementation. The collective expertise of the network creates new options to sustain and support the nascent practice. This allows all participants to experience and make meaning of the learning for their own context.

These three elements—expertise, knowledge generation, and collaborative problem solving through continuous improvement cycles—are what accelerate intentional school transformation. Schools improve because leaders are practicing the habits of school level change within the network. Additionally, the network positions leaders to be impact driven and to codify effective practice. By moving from individual to shared leadership, the network model of leadership allows for change that is sustainable beyond the leader.

**IMPORTANCE OF FRAMEWORKS FOR NETWORKS**

As David Perkin has written, “endeavors to improve teaching and learning are always journeys toward some holy grail—an aspirational framework or philosophy that offers a vision for more effective teaching and learning” (2014). Networks are no different; they require that leaders rally around a common vision and set of expectations for excellence. We have found these frameworks are most useful when they describe practice at multiple levels and provide a clear and concrete pathway for improving practice. Two of our most important anchor frameworks are the Effective Schools Framework that describes what schools where substantial student success is the norm look like and the Leading Through Standards Aligned Frameworks Continuum that organizes all the critical elements necessary to effectively guide learning.

**FRAMEWORKS FOR ALIGNING NETWORK TO RIGOROUS INSTRUCTIONAL VISIONS**

**Effective Schools Framework:** An analysis and synthesis of over twenty years of Wallace Foundation research into effective schools. This framework provides concrete descriptions of practice of what high performing schools have in common across five domains. It is unique in that, unlike traditional leadership frameworks, it describes what a school looks like and evaluates the school and not the leader. This allows for a broader definition of leadership.

**Leading Through Standards-Aligned Frameworks Continuum:** This resource supports a leader in identifying key next steps in implementing standards based instruction. It is informed by the work of Student Achievement Partners, UnboundEd, and the Aspen Institute. It helps a leader to assess a school’s knowledge around college and career standards, collect and use data to inform standards implementation, develop tactics to align the system to support standards implementation, and identify factors that facilitate change management and increase the likelihood of success.

*Both these resources, along with additional continuums, are available at newteachercenter.org*
POWER AND POTENTIAL OF NETWORKS

The ability to create high performing schools through networked leadership is one outcome. Additionally, a network model of leadership provides the opportunity to create systems of effective schools. Most apparent to practitioners, networks support system level improvement because they create the structures for disseminating effective practice and a faster replication of practice by sharing the learning about implementation. We have seen observation tools picked up across schools in a district and the development of common agenda and planning templates. Networks are also an effective method of vertical and horizontal communication which allows for a fluid spread of ideas within and across schools and through central or district offices. One district developed additional Professional Learning Community supports and guides based upon network conversations. Another district found this work focused district leadership on the needs of the schools and allowed for a more targeted entry point for support. What is less obvious is that networks allow for greater systemic change because they include the seeds for grassroots level pressure on systems.

As leaders become more effective, empowered, and connected, they are more able to use collective action to make demands on the system in service of children. They create or unleash communities where leadership is an action held in common instead of a role or position. These communities then have the vision and the tools to improve learning across the system. The system must adopt a mindset of service to, and not director of, schools as their core purpose if they are to meet the needs of higher performing and efficacious schools, leaders, educators, and students. It is this change that allows for the mission, outcomes, and potential of networks of school leaders to be fully realized and sustainable beyond a partnership with technical assistance providers or the tenure of any superintendent.

SAMPLE CRITERIA FOR A HIGH QUALITY NETWORK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who We Are</th>
<th>What We Learn</th>
<th>How We Learn</th>
<th>What We Do &amp; Impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The network has clear goals aligned to a vision statement for the network. The network leaders design activities to develop trust amongst members.</td>
<td>The network is designed to challenge assumptions leaders may hold about:</td>
<td>Learning begins with the knowledge participants bring and participants share expertise with other network members whole group and in smaller content informed peer groups.</td>
<td>The network leaders have tools to openly share member activity so all members can monitor the network.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>❑ Leadership ❑ Change ❑ Developing adults ❑ Learning</td>
<td></td>
<td>❑ Attendance ❑ Task completion ❑ Other activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This work, as most things worth doing, is not easy. In our experience in meaningful change efforts it takes twice as long to get half as far. This is something most anyone who has tried to lose weight or remodeled a home can attest. We all have a gap between our aspirations and desires for change and our recognition of the work and loss involved in that change. Leadership networks do not erase this adaptive challenge. Instead, they remind us that we aren’t in this work alone. They remind us that those of us closest to the challenges facing kids and schools are best equipped to solve them—together.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Adam Parrott-Sheffer is a Senior Advisor at the New Teacher Center, a doctoral candidate in leadership at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and a former principal in Chicago, IL.

David Herrera is a Senior Director at the New Teacher Center, former Chief Achievement Officer at Downtown College Prep, and a former principal in San Jose, CA.
## EFFECTIVE NETWORKS

### CRITERIA FOR A HIGH QUALITY LEADERSHIP NETWORK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHO WE ARE</th>
<th>WHAT WE LEARN</th>
<th>HOW WE LEARN</th>
<th>WHAT WE DO AND IMPACT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| ❑ The network has agreed upon and regularly reviewed norms. | ❑ The network is designed to challenge assumptions leaders may hold about:  
- Leadership  
- Change  
- Developing adults  
- Learning | ❑ Learning begins with the knowledge participants bring and participants share expertise with other network members whole group and in smaller content informed peer groups.  
❑ Each session is built upon relevant, meaningful, and scrutinized research in an effort to avoid stagnation and push forward network members’ thinking.  
❑ The network leaders use a pedagogy to support meta-learning for network members to understand their individual and group processes of learning. | ❑ 90% of network members attend network sessions.  
❑ 80% of network members complete network tasks and activities.  
❑ The network leaders have tools to openly share member activity so all members can monitor the network.  
- Attendance  
- Task completion  
- Other activities |
| ❑ The network has a collective agreement and purpose statement explaining why the network exists, interacts, and learns together. | ❑ The network has a collective agreement and purpose statement explaining why the network exists, interacts, and learns together. |  
❑ Leaders learn systems and protocols for collaboration and gain practice using them. Authentic and rich collaboration in the network better prepares leaders to collaborate successfully at their schools. |  
❑ Attendance  
❑ Task completion  
❑ Other activities |
| ❑ The network has clear goals aligned to a vision statement for the network. | ❑ The network leaders design activities to develop trust amongst members. | ❑ The network leaders design activities to develop trust amongst members. |  
❑ Leaders learn systems and protocols for collaboration and gain practice using them. Authentic and rich collaboration in the network better prepares leaders to collaborate successfully at their schools. |
| ❑ The network leaders design activities to develop trust amongst members. | | ❑ The network leaders design activities to develop trust amongst members. |  
❑ The network teaches members with a process to share complex school-based instructional challenges that benefit from a larger and more diverse group’s insights. Participants learn how to work collectively to solve those problems. |