

Guiding Questions for Starting a Professional Learning Network

When forming a professional learning network, how do you ensure your efforts are meaningful and sustainable? Based on our experiences, we developed this list of guiding questions and design elements to consider.

1. SHARED VISION AND GOALS

Desired outcome(s) for the network—what members hope to gain from participation and what they hope to achieve as a result

Sample questions to consider:

- What will be different when we are successful as a network?
- What specific impact do we want the network to have on students? Adults? Others?

2. NETWORK MEMBERSHIP

Who participates in network activities and how they are selected to join

Sample questions to consider:

- What is the desired unit of membership (districts, schools, teams within schools, individuals)?
- What process do we use to recruit participants (i.e., open application or invitation)?
- To what extent does level of readiness and eagerness matter?

3. FORM OF NETWORKING ACTIVITIES

Structured ways in which network members engage and collaborate with one another

Sample questions to consider:

- What virtual forms of collaborative activities do we want to engage in? How many and how often?
- What types of in-person opportunities for collaboration do we have? How many and how often?
- What kind(s) of initial activities do we think will deeply engage participants for the long term?

4. LEADERSHIP AND NETWORK STEERING

Structures and processes for setting strategic direction and ensuring ongoing management of the network

Sample questions to consider:

- What is the role of the network's leadership team (e.g., steering committee)?
- How will people be appointed and their appointments renewed?
- How will decisions be made on behalf of the network?
- How will we communicate with and secure feedback from members?

5. RESOURCES AND SUSTAINABILITY SUPPORTS

Financial, human, and other resources needed to support and sustain network infrastructure and member participation

Sample questions to consider:

- What types of resources will it take for members to participate? What resources might be available to support member participation?
- What external partners might we want to engage?
- What incentives will be sufficient to motivate participating schools/individuals? Any disincentives?
- What is the nature, extent, and timeline of the return we expect from this investment?

6. NETWORK CITIZENSHIP

Expectations for member participation and accountability

Sample questions to consider:

- What tools will we use to organize participation (e.g., job-alike planning tools, site visit protocols, and observation protocols)?
- What does it mean to fully participate? Will there be formal norms of network participation? In what ways do we make participation visible?
- What kind of scaffolding do we anticipate members will need to interact effectively with one another?
- What are the conditions we need to cultivate to establish collective responsibility for everyone's success?

7. EVALUATION AND DATA USE

Data- and evidence-gathering activities that meet various network stakeholder needs (e.g., continuous improvement, communications, and reporting)

Sample questions to consider:

- What stakeholder groups may want information about network activities and/or impact? What are the information needs of each group?
- How do members report on progress and challenges?
- Who monitors and reviews ongoing progress—and how?

8. KNOWLEDGE CIRCULATION

Ways of communicating, connecting, and learning with other networks, initiatives, and organizations to strengthen the network and contribute to the field

Sample questions to consider:

- What are expectations for publicly sharing work and the results?
- How do we communicate our ideas laterally, vertically, and radially?
- What are the venues and formats through which we can share our work and its results—and with whom?