

Five Characteristics of Successful Education Networks and Five Tips to Achieve Them

School improvement networks—in which educators come together to learn about or create ways to better serve their students—are gaining recognition as a powerful strategy that can make a bigger impact than top-down and individual school reforms.

The model for success is less obvious, however.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach for school improvement networks, in part because they are developed for many reasons, such as to encourage educators to learn from one another or to bring successful programs to scale.

School improvement networks can also vary in their composition. Some bring together highly effective schools to support weaker ones, while others focus on creating better vertical alignment between elementary and secondary schools in a single district.

The Northwest Rural Innovation and Student Engagement (NW RISE) Network, which Education Northwest supports, brings together schools based on a common characteristic: rurality. NW RISE convenes teachers and leaders from some of the Northwest's most isolated and remote communities to learn from one another, share strategies to meet their unique challenges, and spread best practices.

In the past decade, Education Northwest has supported the development and growth of several school improvement networks. In the process, we have found that regardless of how they differ in terms of composition, goals, and structure, all successful networks share some key characteristics:

- ***The work places members at the center.*** Successful networks are member-led and offer a ground-up approach to providing mutual assistance to educators. They also recognize and honor the expertise of their members.
- ***The work is immediately relevant and useful.*** Successful networks stay focused on the pressing needs and challenges of their members and students, so they are not viewed as creating “new work” for busy educators.
- ***The work is transformative.*** Successful networks do not tinker around the edges; rather, they improve systems to ensure all students receive the education they deserve.
- ***The work is conducted with a balance of structure and flexibility.*** Successful networks have enough structure to be effective and enough flexibility to be tailored to members' needs.
- ***The work leads to action.*** While educators in successful networks do spend time sharing ideas, challenges, and strategies, they spend even more time learning together and taking action based on what they've learned.

Further, the success of a network depends on how well its leaders recognize and capitalize on the form of networking that will best meet its goals. This starts with a solid understanding of the motivating factors for members' participation at any given time. Based on our experience, we have identified five networking strategies and activities that can support the network's desired outcomes.

1. **Join forces to attract, leverage, or share resources.** For example, small districts might work together to purchase goods and services to receive discounted rates, share human resources they could not otherwise afford (e.g., school counselors), or centrally coordinate support functions (e.g., information technology).
2. **Collectively develop classroom tools or products.** A group of schools or districts may create something they couldn't develop individually (e.g., curricula or career pathways). The product has broad appeal and can be used by all the co-developers.
3. **Strengthen professional practice.** This involves the development of a deeply collaborative culture—what Dr. Andy Hargreaves calls “collaborative professionalism.” In this environment, educators develop high levels of collective knowledge and experience and exhibit high levels of professional practice through collective learning and action.
4. **Learn to improve.** Collaboration can strengthen continuous improvement by following principles of improvement science. For example, educators from different contexts can work together to design, implement, test, and redesign promising practices, gradually moving from making small changes in one or two sites to making larger changes across the network.
5. **Generate and use context-specific data and evidence.** Networks can provide an opportunity for members to build relationships with researchers that foster the use of data and evidence to solve problems of practice. A research-practice partnership, for example, involves educators and researchers working together to solve pressing problems at the local level.

Although networks typically form and are organized based on one primary impetus, they will often coalesce around several strategies (sometimes from the outset, sometimes as they evolve). Success seems to depend on knowing which strategy to emphasize at a particular juncture—that is, which one is most likely to meet the network's goals and its members' needs.

For example, NW RISE members share twin goals of reducing the isolation of rural educators and improving rural student engagement and achievement. To meet these goals, the network was initially driven by the need to strengthen professional practice. The result was productive classroom-focused work, conducted in job-alike groups, which became the network's primary vehicle for collaboration.

Now in its fifth year, NW RISE is currently focusing on student engagement. Its members are increasingly interested in expanding opportunities for students to explore career options and engage in hands-on learning that provides work-related experience. In addition, members are discussing ways to work across districts to maximize local connections to industry and community.

Although other strategies are still in play, the network is primarily driven by its interest in collectively developing tools or products—specifically, a networkwide applied learning curriculum that will greatly expand and focus the work of the job-alike groups.

When you're deeply involved in creating or managing a strong school improvement network, it can be difficult to see the bigger picture. Network creators and leaders need partners who know what it's like to deal with multiple moving parts, while keeping the focus on the main goals and priorities.

To help educators plan or strengthen their networks, Education Northwest provides a continuum of specialized services. The examples below illustrate some of the key roles we have play.

DESIGN

We support the development of education networks through an evidence-informed approach that is based on our deep experience in the field. We help emerging networks build their capacity to use data and evidence-based solutions to address challenges that require teamwork.

For nascent networks, we serve as:

- A thought partner/advisor, helping our clients consider whether and how to start a network
- A data and evidence partner, designing surveys and other tools to assess needs and capacity and to synthesize relevant research
- A design process advisor or facilitator

CONVENE

We bring together groups that share a common goal and help them become high-performing, self-sustaining networks. Time is valuable when it comes to professional development, networking, or planning activities—and our experienced facilitators help you get the most out of your time together

For existing networks, we serve as:

- A coach, identifying strengths and potential challenges and offering expertise on how to address them as the network evolves
- An intermediary or backbone organization
- Managing virtual and face-to-face communication
- Supporting convenings and meetings with planning and/or facilitation
- Providing essential logistical supports, including data and analytics
- Creating quality communications materials (e.g., logos, templates, videos, web and social media presence)
- Helping network leaders create a stable resource base
- Providing connections to outside experts and other complementary networks and initiatives

EVALUATE

External evaluation is critical to the success and sustainability of networks. An evaluation can tell you what elements are (or are not) working and whether the network is making a difference. The process relies on examining challenges and successes—and making sure people work together.

For existing networks, we conduct formative and summative evaluation activities to support strategic planning and/or to spur growth or results at a higher level.

Under the right circumstances, school improvement networks produce enduring connections and concrete accomplishments. They require a specific kind of expertise, as well as “on-the-ground” experience. Education Northwest is proud to partner with educators who are working hard to collaboratively strengthen schools’ capacity to meet the needs of all their students.

Contact us today!

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