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?

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