



Superintendents' Networks

Each Area Education Agency (AEA) in Iowa offers superintendents an opportunity to join a Superintendents' Network. Iowa is the only state in the nation that has a statewide 'network of networks' dedicated to supporting superintendents in their work as instructional leaders. Coordinated through the Iowa Leadership Academy, networks are supported by the AEA statewide system and the Wallace Foundation. Collaborative partners are AEA's, School Administrators of Iowa, Iowa Association of School Boards, Institutions of Higher Education and the Department of Education.

History

The network model emerged from work with a small group of Connecticut superintendents started by Richard Elmore, Harvard University, and Andrew Lachman, Connecticut Center for Social Change. Elmore and Harvard colleagues Elizabeth City, Sarah Fiarman and Lee Teitel have refined the model through work with other networks. Their 2009 book, *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning*, explains the theory behind network rounds, as well as specifics to help networks improve their practice.

Iowa became involved in networks during the 2007-2008 school year when Elmore was invited to share the model with superintendents in Mississippi Bend AEA. After careful consideration, the group decided to pilot the network model during the 2008-2009 school year. During the pilot year, the possibility of expanding networks to all AEA's was discussed, and the AEA Chief Administrators dedicated resources to this effort. School Administrators of Iowa provided staff to coordinate networks as a part of the Iowa Leadership Academy. A 35-member cadre of Iowa educational leaders, including superintendents and representatives of collaborative partners, was trained by a team from Harvard to facilitate networks. Networks were formed in all AEA's during spring semester 2009, with approximately 90 superintendent participants.

Purpose

Networks involve an explicit practice intended to build knowledge and skills of participating superintendents, and to provide helpful feedback to their schools. Network members develop a shared understanding of teaching and learning through discussions of common classroom observations. This understanding is connected to the district process of school improvement, and can be used to improve instruction at scale.

Networks at Work

To join a network, superintendents complete a commitment form that requires the signature of a board member. Networks use an "instructional rounds model" in which superintendents participate in site visits to each other's districts. The host superintendent presents a "problem of practice," then network colleagues use a set of non-judgmental protocols and practices to observe classroom instruction, debrief, and provide feedback and suggestions for the next level of work. Over time, all members' schools are visited, leading to shared understandings of issues related to improving teaching and learning. Trained facilitators coordinate professional learning, organize visits, facilitate network conversations, and ensure fidelity to the basic principles of the model. Facilitators from all networks meet periodically to coordinate their work and ensure statewide consistency.

Initially, facilitators in each network determine structural elements such as network size, time commitment, frequency of site visits, etc. Network members establish norms of practice for things such as attendance, mutual responsibility, involvement/attentiveness, confidentiality, sharing, etc. Network members determine how they will hold themselves and each other accountable for honoring their norms. Participants are expected to: attend all network meetings; host and participate in site visits; and be an active and engaged learner. The typical time commitment for meetings and visits combined is one day per month.

Network Learnings

Authors City, Elmore, Fiarman and Teitel remind us “you learn to do the work by doing the work.” Although novices, ILA Network members are, indeed, learning. The work is challenging, invigorating and exciting. A participating superintendent reported getting more out of a one-day site visit than out of several days and a couple thousand dollars attending a national conference. Our initial positive experiences foreshadow the promise of this model for creating a shared practice of improvement.

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