

Building Network Connections: Learning Across Teams

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Actualizing the power of a network to accelerate improvement depends on network members connecting with and learning from each other. This learning happens in intentionally designed participation structures: regularly scheduled and carefully designed network meetings, team meetings, and cross-team idea sharing routines. Network leaders design and support participation structures and introduce tools and routines that organize what network members are learning, learn from the variation across the different network contexts, and connect what is learned across teams.

Building Cross-Team Connections

Improvement networks in the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Networks for School Improvement (NSI) provide the opportunity for members to learn from each other, broadening exposure to a wide range of experience, expertise, and knowledge they may not otherwise access. As school teams test changes, they identify promising ideas, useful practical measures, and effective team processes; sharing these with other school teams across the network is a powerful way to accelerate learning.

Spotlighting Networks for School Improvement

Based on 2022 Network Health Survey data, nine NSI were achieving in cross-team connections and two NSI had statistically significant growth in this area.* In this brief, we summarize some of the practices these networks use to support strong cross-team connections. You may notice that many hub leaders use cross-team connections as part of their broader knowledge management strategy. Some patterns emerge as leaders describe:

- Role alike meetings
- Making time in network meetings for teams to share ideas
- Tools to carry the ideas across teams

KIPP: The Academic & Counseling Excellence (ACE) Network

In the KIPP Academics and Counseling Excellence Network, each member of our school improvement teams is also a **member of a specific role-alike community**. There are five specific role-alike groups, three of which focus on one of our core drivers. For example, instructional coaches and teachers attend an Academic Rigor group, 9th grade Assistant Principals attend our Academic Health group (9th grade on track) and Directors of College Counseling attend our Postsecondary Match group. In addition, there are groups specifically for Team Leaders (principals) and for Data Leaders. Each of these role-alike communities come together monthly for virtual meetings that provide opportunities to connect across schools with their peers who are focused on the same goals. During these meetings, **we prioritize time for reviewing progress, unpacking challenges, and sharing learnings**. This may look like sharing an emerging change idea and getting feedback to refine it or sharing challenges that have come up in implementing a change idea and getting thought partnership on how to solve it. The meetings build connection, momentum, and facilitate the spread of knowledge across our network.

* **Note on methodology:** NSI were considered "achieving" in an area on the 2022 Network Health Survey if they were in top 25% relative to all 2021 NSI. They were considered "significantly improving" if members' perspectives in 2022 were significantly more positive than their perspectives in 2021 (based on a standardized t-statistic).



Baltimore City Public Schools: Baltimore Secondary Literacy Improvement Community (BSLIC)

Working with many teachers at once, across various classroom contexts, required the network to **develop tools that made cross-team sharing and collaboration easier**. To more systematically collect the data that was generated through the iterative cycles, the network created the Lab Notebook tool (named and designed to reflect a scientist's lab notebook that documents their learnings when conducting experiments) for teachers to store all of their data and qualitative reflections. **Every teacher, regardless of classroom context, uses the same tool – this has resulted in a more cohesive community of learners and practitioners, even if what they're testing is different**. The way the notebook has been designed helps teachers work through the process of a PDSA cycle and then be able to share their learning. With quantitative and qualitative data sitting side-by-side in the notebook, teachers are able to reflect on a well-rounded learning experience.

In order to make sharing up and out (with network leadership and to other teachers) more efficient, the lab notebooks (which are designed in Google Sheets) are connected to **group sharing note catchers**, so Fellows can instantly access other practitioners' new insights and learnings across their group; during huddle meetings, Fellows are given time to review their colleagues' individual reflections before participating in a group discussion.

In addition to the lab notebooks, **BSLIC has created and refined the use of end-of-Action Period learning consolidation slides** to create a "repository" of learnings for a specific Action Period. All resources for and from BSLIC improvement activities are stored in an accessible Google Shared Drive – designed in collaboration with teachers – for improvers to access as needed.

Network leads create strategic small groups of schools testing similar change ideas, based on common conditions and challenges.

-Baltimore City Public Schools: 9th Grade on Track

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The 9th-Grade on Track to Graduate (OTG) Improvement Network has facilitated cross-team connections through biweekly learning huddle routines designed to build and reinforce the improvement dispositions and habits in school teams. School teams prepare themselves for these meetings by gathering and analyzing their own school's 9th Grade Success Team implementation and outcome data.

The network's biweekly learning huddles provide school teams a place to learn from each other by giving them opportunities to hear from other network members, to reflect on the tools they are using for student data tracking, and to adapt their own tools and routines to incorporate best practices from other schools. These learning huddles happen virtually, with network leaders building out interactive note catchers and collaboration activities to facilitate social learning and promote the sharing of ideas.

Network leads create strategic small groups of schools testing similar change ideas, based on common conditions and challenges, which allows for more focused breakout discussions during huddle meetings. The network leads do this by analyzing network-level data and their own knowledge of the inner workings of each school's team. Also, because network leaders attend each school's Success Team meetings, they are able to identify bright spots that are then **regularly incorporated and discussed during huddle meetings**. In this way, each school's individual inquiry feeds into collaborative reflection that allows high schools to tweak their plans and overcome any barriers to success they are facing.



Bank Street: Brooklyn South Network for School Improvement (BKS NSI)

In the Brooklyn South Network for School Improvement (BKS NSI), **we have deliberately designed our meeting structures and tools with knowledge management and sharing in mind.** In each network meeting, **school teams gather in theory of improvement (TOI) groups** to discuss how to collectively apply those pedagogical ideas in the context of their PDSA work. This series of network meetings culminates in school teams giving mini-presentations using this [Learning Journey Presentation Template](#). This allows them to share the most successful adaptation they made to their change idea, articulate the rationale for that adaptation, provide the results that drove the adaptation process, and explain how their learning connected to the TOI they were testing. **Teams testing the same TOI present to each other so that they could connect their learning more effectively.** Finally, we name, partner with, and support teacher continuous improvement leaders (TCILs) in monthly check-in meetings where they collaborate with each other as well as with us as hub partners to respond to needs that TCILs see arising in their teams. These TCILs lead their teams in conducting their CI work.

New York City Department of Education City-Wide Networked Improvement Community for Multilingual Learners

- **At periodic network convenings, there is time for teams to exchange feedback through consultancies, gallery walks, spotlights, panels, and small group artifact shares.**
- Our network has a finite **menu of change ideas** that include step by step implementation guides. In convening activities, often **teams are grouped by change idea**, allowing for concrete feedback.
- At the end of the year, teams publish their learning in **"change packets"**, which are then added to the network's shared resources.
- **Each team collects their artifacts in a digital notebook (slide deck) visible to all teams in a shared drive** (artifacts include their vision for racial equity, problem analysis findings, theory of improvement, focus student data, and student work). Each team's completed PDSAs are also visible in the shared drive.

The Dallas Independent School District/Institute for Learning Network for School Improvement

A central focus of the Dallas ISD/IFL Network for School Improvement is sharing learning across grade-levels and across schools. We've **structured our monthly network convenings to invite teachers to share their classroom practice, engage in conversations around that practice, learn about or deepen their own knowledge about literacy instructional practices, and then take what they've learned from each other back to their schools to apply it to a small test of instructional change.** Teachers then engage in the cycle of sharing and learning again at the next monthly meeting. **Building trust** amongst the teachers and with us, the hub team, has been key to the success of having teachers share their practice. Teachers in our network have reported that these opportunities to share and learn from each other have helped them to grow their own professional knowledge & practice as well as to build cross school connections that expand the knowledge pool and problem-solving resources that they have access to. As the Hub for the network, the IFL helps to facilitate these connections through:

- organizing and facilitating **monthly network convenings** that focus on specific topics related to drivers identified by network schools.
- **a network website with change packages as well as links to the content of each network meeting and teachers' shared artifacts.** Network teachers report revisiting the website to "steal" instructional ideas from each other when they are planning around the shared district curriculum.
- organizing opportunities for **cross-school professional learning communities (PLCs)** that bring teachers from different schools to share in planning instructional change.
- **inviting school and district leadership into network meetings** to help them understand what teaching and learning looks and sounds like in network classrooms. This helps [leadership align their vision](#) for instruction to the work of network teachers and removes barriers to teacher implementation because teachers know that leadership understands the change work they've undertaken.



New Visions: College Ready Network for School Improvement (CR NSI)

1. We created a **network wide directory** organized by cohort and school (staff name, email address and role) so network members had an easy way to follow up with colleagues they met at convenings.
2. We **structured our internal coaches' meetings to provide time for coaches to share** glows and grows across their portfolios. Where we had some schools solving problems that others were still experiencing, the coaches took it upon themselves to make those connections.
 - a. Also from these coaches' meetings, we could highlight where a single school was addressing (or attempting to address) a concern many schools had, and we offered optional topical webinars hosted by those schools to allow others to more easily learn from them.
3. **We structured our convenings to intentionally support cross school sharing.** Schools presented either a best practice or a problem of practice and could leverage the expertise in the room to get feedback. In our end-of-year convening, we had a couple schools shout out other schools because they tried things that they heard at prior convenings.
4. We intentionally asked in feedback forms for them to **record something they heard and wanted to follow up on** and our coaches used that information to make connections.
5. We hosted a **convening specifically for our Team Leads** so they could strategize with staff from other schools playing the same role they do. Based on this, some of our coaches continued to convene the Team Leads across their portfolio so they had more frequent touch points.

Cross-district partnerships involve a consultancy with a protocol to enhance conversation and assure equity of voice.

-California Education Partners

California Education Partners: 8th Grade

We bring our teams together three times a year for convenings. During the pandemic these were virtual events but both before and after we held in person convenings. One of the most important aspects of these convenings are activities that we call **cross district partnerships. These activities often involve a consultancy with a particular protocol to enhance conversation and assure equity of voice.** When districts are paired together, program managers are very intentional in their pairings. Whether it is similarity in geographic region, district size or problem of practice these pairings are designed to deepen trust and vulnerability between districts and are often sustained over multiple years. **It is not uncommon for team members to develop strong professional relationships that last long after the NSI concludes.**



Teach Plus

The Teach Plus NSI is structured around supporting school-based teams to implement continuous improvement cycles in their middle schools. By coaching teacher leaders on CI and teacher leadership best practices and administrators on CI and distributed leadership best practices, Teach Plus is growing capacity at the individual school level to implement teacher-led continuous improvement, driven by middle school grade level teams. **We bring our teacher leaders together monthly for cohort meetings and the TLs/school leaders for quarterly convenings.** Some structures that we have used in the cohort meetings and convenings are:

- **Grouping teams by primary or secondary drivers for planning change ideas;**
- **Using panels of TLs at cohort meetings to discuss their strategies that have shown success when it comes to leading others through PDSA cycles;**
- **Shining a spotlight on a school to showcase the school-based practices that have enabled successful implementation of CI processes**
- **Fishbowl where TLs modeled their PDSA processing meeting**
- **Utilizing community slides for TLs to share and learn about others change ideas and results**

Additionally, some change ideas, such as learning progressions, have gained steam across several schools, and one of our coaches pulls teacher leaders from across schools/coaches to share ideas outside of cohort meetings and convenings.

Partners in School Innovation: Middle Grades Success Network Learning Network 3 (LN3)

In our network, both via the on-site support we provide and at convening sessions, we work to help our school-based clients get better at getting better. One nuance of our portfolio is that in most schools, there is no one who has the exact same role: there is one principal, one school-based teacher leader, and one teacher per grade and/or subject area, often leaving people feeling isolated with no one to collaborate with. **We intentionally connect people across schools who can support each other.** In convening spaces, **we intentionally group participants;** sometimes we group within school teams for context, other times we randomize them and sometimes we homogeneously group people by role. **In role-alike rooms, participants can share strategies, successes, opportunities, etc. with others who do similar things across our network.**

Additionally, our partnership with our district champions supports the collaboration created by the network - our **district champions affirm our work across our schools and support fostering relationships across schools and roles.**

Different implementers intentionally fostered collaboration between schools and clients. For example, we formed some groups of role-alike positions to collaborate to meet a common need. In other instances, **we created learning opportunities for school teams or individuals to observe practices** to support challenges within their school communities. For example, if a school needed a more systematic way of supporting intervention, the implementer/hub coach connected and/or made a suggestion for another school site already engaging in this practice.



Partners in School Innovation: East Side Alliance (ESA)

The Partners in School Innovation ESA (East side Alliance in San Jose, CA) Team reviewed the PNI results after year one and selected Network Connections as one of the focal domains that we wanted to impact positively. During the summer between our first and second years, we created a working theory of improvement visualized as a driver diagram to clarify what specific change ideas we would like to spread across our Network. **We supported participants in exploring common change ideas by implementing what we called “Change Idea PLCs” that became part of our Network structure.**

We sought and encouraged sites to share about promising practices they were implementing and provided space for schools to participate in share outs and consultancies with one another. This improved cross-site collaboration because teams were able to share their learnings around four areas of exploration which include Collective Efficacy, Equitable Grading, Support for MLLs (Multi-lingual Learners), and Student Voice that we were all considering together.

We **curated case studies and toolkits to highlight practices** in order to lift up educators' voices in our Network.

Teams have benefited from seeing TOA (Theory of Action) and PLP (Professional Learning Plans) from other sites. **We have made these core documents transparent** for all in the Network to see which has sparked deeper alignment and innovation.

Resources: Team ESA shared a reflection (Learning from PNI—a deck with a video link) with other internal network leads.

Hub Team Sharing Across NSI

In some cases, intermediaries support multiple NSI. Building intentional routines for the hub members who support those networks to learn from each other can be another “cross-team connection” that accelerates learning and improvement.

Partners in School Innovation

We have internal learning systems within the larger organization that is Partners in School Innovation. We prioritize connections across teams, especially in our learning spaces. **We have allotted time weekly for cross-team learning, where we work to understand, refine, and implement our approach, discuss race/class/culture/power, and engage in smaller cohort coaching Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).**

As a hub team, we have several internal structures that we've continued to refine as we develop convening sessions that meet the needs of our participants. We use results-oriented cycles of inquiry around data we collect to continuously improve. For example, after each session, we review and discuss the feedback participants provided in their session evaluations to make big and small adjustments. We have a process by which we brainstorm together, trim down ideas, build the content, share as a team, run-through and then finalize the remaining technical pieces needed to execute a session. This typically happens across a month of time. As we plan for future sessions, we lean into an iterative structure for convening sessions that tends to meet clients' needs (we keep the same “buckets” or topics so there is a level of predictability and mental muscle being built for participants). Additionally, we regularly reflect on how we're implementing the strategy we developed in our Theory of Action/driver diagram; understanding the pieces of the puzzle alongside the “balcony view” of our network helps us reflect on our progress as a team.