Network Health Project

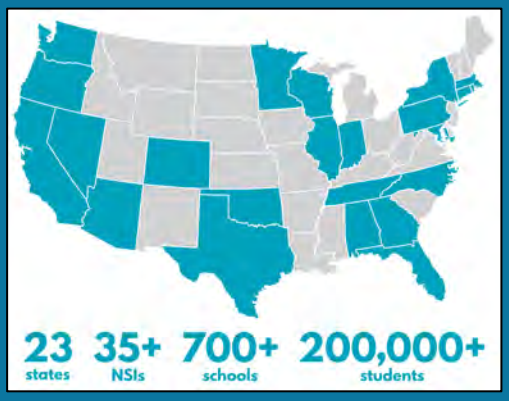
improvementnetworks.org

- Conceptualize and measure "**improvement network health and development**" in partnership with the Gates Foundation
- Provide actionable data to network leaders and the foundation to support network development
- Mixed methods longitudinal study of the development of a large sample of improvement networks

Visit our website:

Study Context: Gates Foundation's Networks for School Improvement Initiative

Intermediary organizations funded to organize networks of 10+ secondary schools focused on improving student achievement by tackling complex problems (e.g., students who get off track on the pathway to high school graduation).



- Power of the initiative: first large scale engagement of networks of this kind
- Select group of intermediaries/hubs; made it through vetting process
- Significant support for network development - ecosystem, CoP
- Still a lot of variability - exactly what you would expect and an opportunity to learn from both positive (and negative) cases of development

The Network Health Project Team

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Paper available at:

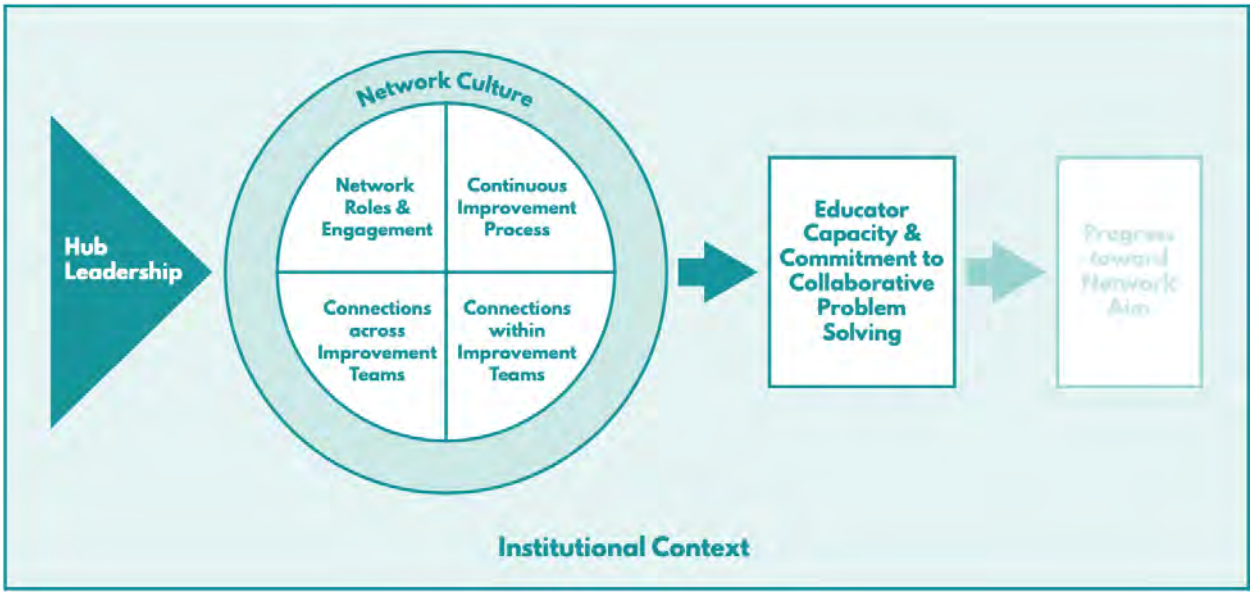
Catalyzing Scientific-Professional Learning Communities: A Framework for Conceptualizing the Health and Development of Educational Improvement Networks

Jennifer Lin Russell, Anthony S. Bryk, Donald J. Peurach, Jennifer Zoltners Sherer, Megan Duff, David Sherer, & Chris Matthis

ABSTRACT

- Improvement networks are **a novel organizational form designed to support collaborative, inter-organizational learning and improvement** aimed at solving complex, interdependent problems spanning classrooms, schools, systems, and their broader contexts.
- These networks aim to **develop and augment local capabilities for innovation and improvement** by creating an organizational structure to coordinate educator driven inquiry that explores the impact of practice changes and the adaptations that support the spread of promising practices across contexts.
- This article introduces a framework grounded in the Networked Improvement Community (NIC) concept that describes the social and cultural components of a high functioning improvement network: the **Improvement Network Health and Development Framework**. The framework was developed and iteratively refined through a review of literature and theory on networked improvement in education and other sectors, as well as the authors' practice-based knowledge generated through deep engagement in the operation and developmental evaluation of multiple NICs.
- The framework was developed to be an **analytic framework for network leaders, evaluators, and researchers to think and reason about healthy improvement networks**. In this sense it is both a practical framework and a theory of the way NICs operate as scientific-professional learning communities.

Figure 1. Improvement Network Health & Development Framework: Catalyzing a Scientific-Professional Learning Community



Improvement Network Health & Development (INHD) Framework

Networked Improvement Communities (NICs) create opportunities for educators to engage in rigorous testing of practice changes, work collaboratively with colleagues within and across organizations, and accumulate practical insights that can yield substantive improvement in the educational processes that shape student learning and development (Bryk et al., 2011, 2015; Hannan et al., 2015; Russell et al., 2017, 2025; Yamada et al., 2018).

Drawing on theory and prior research, we developed the INHD Framework to describe a high-functioning NIC, what we refer to as a healthy improvement network.

The framework posits six domains that, when functioning effectively together, constitute healthy improvement networks (see Figure 1):

1. **Strong hub leadership**: Hubs are the teams that lead and manage networks. Hubs act as a driver for improvement network development. Strong hubs build trust, coordinate collaborative activity, and manage learning processes.
2. **Network roles and engagement**: Everyone in the network understands their role and takes part in improvement work.
3. **Continuous improvement processes**: Teams use systematic routines—such as regular inquiry cycles—to test and refine practice changes.
4. **Connections within improvement teams**: Improvement teams (within each organization that makes up the network) engage in effective collaboration processes.
5. **Connections across improvement teams**: Improvement teams share promising practice changes (based on systematic testing) with other teams, supporting cross-organizational learning.
6. **Network culture**: A shared sense of purpose, mutual trust, and openness to learning from data facilitates collaborative learning and improvement.

As shown in Figure 1, productive activity in the six domains is expected to lead to two outcomes: (1) increased **educator capacity and commitment to collaborative problem solving;** and ultimately, (2) **progress toward the network's improvement aim**.

Institutional context: Improvement networks operate in interaction with broader state, district, and school contexts which may support or inhibit network development.

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Paper available at:

Examining the Validity of Practical Measures of Improvement Network Health and Development

Anthony S. Bryk, Angel Yee-lam Li, Stuart Luppescu, and Mai Anh Bui

ABSTRACT

This article details a measurement system, aligned with the Improvement Network Health and Development Framework (INHD Framework), that we designed to track the emergence, development, and health of improvement networks. The measures that make up the Improvement Network Health and Development Survey (INHD Survey) provide valid and reliable signals about the health and development of networks. The article presents evidence on the psychometric and statistical properties of measures developed from the Improvement Network Health and Development Survey that was created for this purpose. Rasch Rating Scale Analyses were used to guide the creation of the measures, and hierarchical linear model analyses were used to examine their reliability at the school and network levels.

Findings

We found that the INHD survey measures both distinguish reliably among networks at a fixed point in time and have the capacity to differentiate among them in their rates of development over time. The results presented here indicate that this system of measures can provide reliable formative feedback to those engaged in attempting to launch and develop improvement networks. Furthermore, these results provide the technical underpinnings for a web-based tool, described by Sherer and colleagues (2025), that feeds this evidence quickly back to the participating improvement networks.

Figure 1: Internal Team Collaborative Inquiry differentiates among networks at a fixed time point

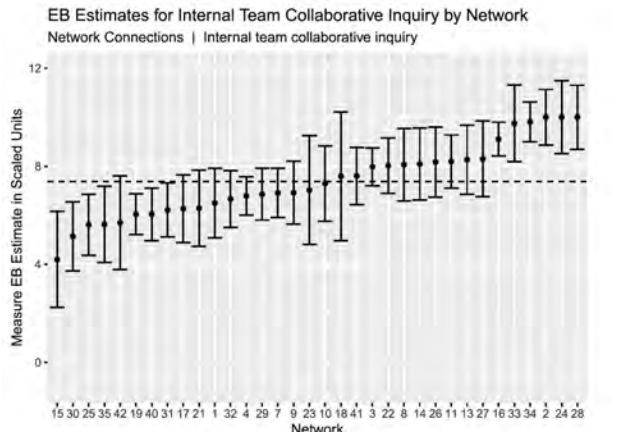

Figure 2: Membership to promote expertise diversity measure differentiates among networks in their rate of development

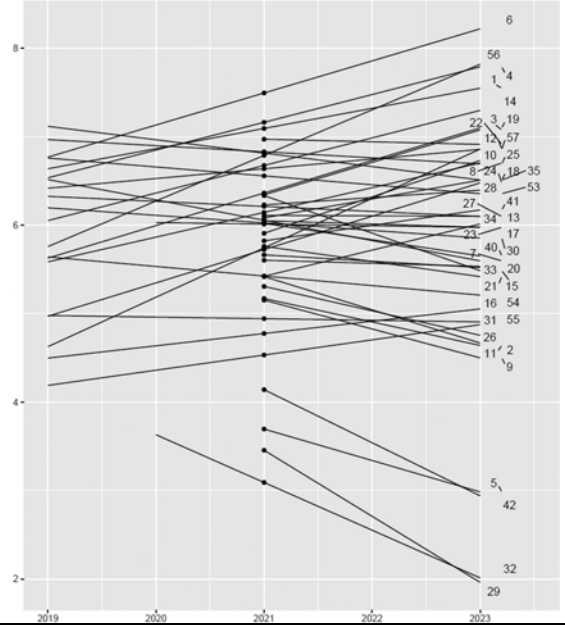

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Table 1. An Example of INHD Survey Measures – Membership to Promote Expertise Diversity

Lead-in text	Survey items	Response scale
Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:	[NETWORK NAME] has brought together a group of people with diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and expertise.	1 (Do not agree) to 5 (Strongly agree)
	The network includes members with relevant diversity, equity, and inclusion expertise to inform our improvement activities.	
	The network includes diverse leaders who represent the educators and students in the schools we seek to improve.	

Table 2. Reliability Estimates for INHD Survey Measures

Construct/ Domain 2021	Measure name	No. of items	Individual-respondent reliability	School-level reliability	Network-level reliability
Hub leadership	*Relational trust with leaders*	5	0.86	0.25	0.79
	Knowledge management	5	0.91	0.23	0.82
	Network leadership honors diverse perspectives	5	0.68	0.01 (n.s.)	0.68
	Network decisionmaking	2	0.80	0.20	0.69
	Sustaining social participation	6	0.90	0.18	0.76
	Hub support for school team leads	7	0.91	0.06 (n.s.)	0.29 (n.s.)
Network roles andengagement	*Membership to promote expertise diversity*	3	0.82	0.21	0.84
	Selection and induction	3	0.88	0.27	0.74
	Have a voice	1	N/A	0.20	0.68
	Believes inquiry helps us improve	1	N/A	0.23	0.78
Network connections	*Internal team connections: team norms*	6	0.91	0.30	0.68
	Internal team connections: processes and support	4	0.89	0.29	0.68
	Internal team connections: collaborative inquiry	5	0.92	0.23	0.88
	Internal team connections: team meetings	4	0.89	0.28	0.76
	Internal team connections: team learning	3	0.85	0.12 (n.s.)	0.76
	Relational trust with team members	5	0.84	0.17	0.70
	Cross-team connections: learning	3	0.52	0.05 (n.s.)	0.78
	Cross-team connections: collaborative inquiry	4	0.86	0.09 (n.s.)	0.74
	Cross-team connections: collaborative technology	5	0.93	0.12	0.79
Continuous improvement	*Continuous improvement for equity*	5	0.93	0.20	0.84
	Continuous improvement confidence	3	0.87	0.13	0.79
	Use of data and analytics	4	0.85	0.22	0.81
	Understanding the problem to be addressed	3	0.87	0.11 (n.s.)	0.89
	Working theory of improvement	5	0.88	0.26	0.85
	Inquiry cycle challenges	5	0.91	0.17	0.21 (n.s.)
Network culture	*Collective identity*	6	0.87	0.18	0.81
	Evidence-based culture	5	0.87	0.19	0.73
	Equity-driven culture	5	0.90	0.22	0.78
	Utilizing research knowledge	2	0.67	0.24	0.83
	Shared narrative	4	0.82	0.03 (n.s.)	0.81
Contexts for improvement	*System alignment: district priorities*	3	0.85	0.32	0.70
	System alignment: school priorities	5	0.89	0.32	0.65
	Challenges	5	0.82	0.31	0.67
Participatory benefits	*Benefits*	3	0.93	0.29	0.83
	Value	3	0.91	0.37	0.84
	Makes a difference for students	1	N/A	0.21	0.76
	Will improve my school	1	N/A	0.25	0.68
	Recommend network to a colleague	1	N/A	0.24	0.83

Italicized measure names were core indicators collected from all NSIs. Remaining measures were available to NSIs as additional optional choices.

Paper available at:

Exploring Variation in Educational Improvement Network Health and Development

Jennifer Lin Russell, Anthony S. Bryk, & Jennifer Zoltners Sherer

The Improvement Network Health and Development Framework (INHD Framework) articulated by Russell and colleagues (2025) sets a vision for a complex new organizational form for practical problem solving: the Networked Improvement Community (NIC). One critical test of this idealized framework is to explore its usefulness in describing variation in these deliberatively formed, temporary problem-solving networks as they are operationalized in the public school context.

This paper explores the health and development of 34 improvement networks catalyzed by the Gates Foundation's Networks for School Improvement (NSI) initiative using evidence generated from the survey-based measurement system described by Bryk and colleagues (2025).

We present evidence that at least six NSIs from the sample of 34 have normative practices and member attitudes that strongly align with the INHD Framework, suggesting that some intentional improvement communities aligned with the framework have come into existence, while another sub-set of five NSIs were significantly struggling to realize the idealized vision of a scientific-professional learning community. We found some differences between the most developed cluster and the least developed cluster (see Table 1). For example, the well-developed cluster tended to be in operation for longer and spanned improvement goals (three were instructional, two aimed to improve pathways to postsecondary education, and one focused on early warning system). Four of five least-developed networks were instructionally focused in large urban districts.

Instructional
NSIs working to improve the quality of instruction within classrooms

Early warning and response
NSIs supporting schools to use data to identify and support students on a pathway to graduation

Well-matched postsecondary
NSIs working to support postsecondary application, enrollment, and persistence

	Improvement Goal	Launch Date	~Members in 2023	Districts	Member Stability (%>1 year)	Average Tenure (Years) of 2023 Members	Hub Stability
W1	Early Warning	2018	50	Multiple	88%	2.65	Stable
W2	Post-Sec Match	2019	300	Single	63%	1.89	Stable
W3	Post-Sec Match	2018	200	Multiple	76%	2.33	Stable
W4	Instructional	2020	60	Multiple	36%	1.66	Some Turnover
W5	Instructional	2018	70	Single	68%	2.28	Early Turnover (then Stable)
W6	Instructional	2021	65	Single	90%	2.68	Some Turnover
L1	Post-Sec Match	2020	120	Multiple	57%	1.94	Some Turnover
L2	Instructional	2020	40	Single	65%	2.13	Some Turnover
L3	Instructional	2021	130	Single	80%	2.36	High Turnover
L4	Instructional	2019	120	Single	15%	1.2	High Turnover
L5	Instructional	2022	60	Single	39%	1.39	Stable

Table 1: *Structural characteristics of well-developed and least-developed networks.*

Following these high-level patterns, we examined evidence from program documentation to cross validate patterns found in network health and development identified through the survey.

In the well-developed networks, hub leaders tended to have more sophisticated technical supports for improvement and greater capacity for social learning. Hub leaders intentionally design structures, routines, and tools to support both the technical and social support for improvement.

Technical and Social Support for Improvement

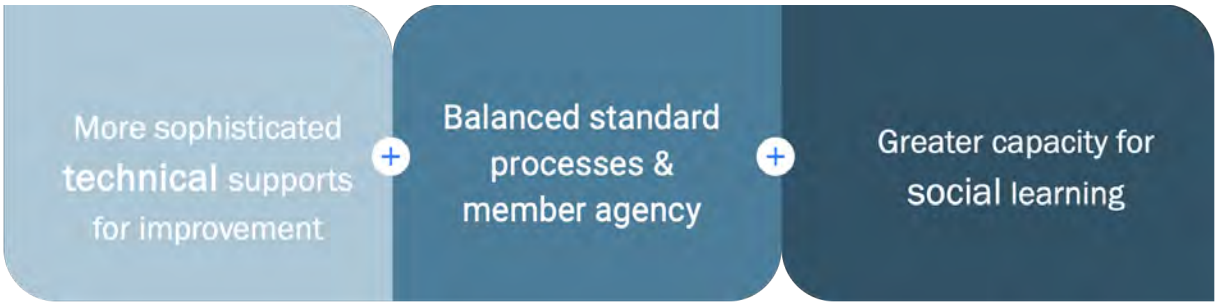
In order for network members to learn to engage in continuous improvement, they must learn the language, tools, and routines of continuous improvement methodology. This includes **technical aspects** of the work such as:

- standardized tools and routines for testing practice changes (e.g., PDSA cycles).
- regular data collection, analysis, and use (e.g., practical measures).

Networked improvement is collaborative. The **social processes** that support continuous improvement include:

- iterating productive meeting protocols to strengthen collaborative work.
- building regular opportunities for cross-team learning (e.g., whole-network meetings with intentionally designed cross-team interactions, role-alike meetings, and affinity groups).

Additionally, the well-developed networks balanced the need to standardize of work while preserving member agency. Members of a healthy improvement network are working together to solve a shared problem. Working in such a community requires some standardization of work; these shared routines, tools and/or structures both support and constrain individual actions. For example, one well-developed network iteratively refined their "framework for collaborative, continuous improvement" and tools used by coaches to put the framework into use. Hub leaders specially noted that the model aimed to reduce variability among coaches by standardizing the support coaches provided to their improvement teams. Yet, at the same time, these school-based teams were able to exert agency in the continuous improvement process by setting their own annual improvement priorities and selecting practice changes that aligned to these aims.



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Conceptualizing and Measuring Educators' Participatory Benefits in Improvement Networks

Hanan Perlman, University of Pittsburgh; Anthony Bryk, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; and Jennifer Russell, Vanderbilt University

Summary

Networked improvement communities (NICs) aim to build capacity for school-based educators to work collaboratively as active agents of problem solving and change. A largely unexamined dimension of NICs lies in understanding what motivates school-based educators to engage in challenging work for which they often have little preparation and that requires considerable time and effort above their conventional responsibilities (Rohanna, 2022). In this paper, we explore one potential source of internal motivation: the benefits that individual educators derive from the work of participating in collaborative problem-solving efforts with colleagues.

Using survey responses from the members of 34 improvement networks, we conceptualize and construct a **measure of participatory benefits for school-based educators in improvement networks**. This measure provides an indicator of participants' commitment and motivation to engage in collaborative local problem solving and to sustain network membership – an initial indicator of progress toward network improvement aims (e.g., improved student outcomes). Our analyses provide evidence of the reliability of the members' participatory benefits measure. We identify distinct individual and network characteristics that are associated with variations in member reports of their participatory benefits.

The Nine Items Used in Measure Construction, by Conceptual Construct

Rasch Scale	Construct	Item
Holistic valuation: Participation is valuable and worthwhile		
1 (easiest to endorse)	Values network participation	I value the opportunity to be part of [NETWORK NAME]
7	Network is worthwhile	[NETWORK NAME] is worth the time it takes
9 (hardest to endorse)	Would give network priority	I am willing to give up other professional commitments to stay engaged in this network
Benefit: Collective pursuit of a valued improvement aim		
4	Makes a difference for students	I believe our work is making a difference for the students we serve
2	Will improve my school	The work we do in this network has the potential to improve [NETWORK PROBLEM] at our school(s)
3	Values belonging to community	Feeling a part of a larger community aiming to accomplish something important together
Benefit: Building individual capabilities for problem solving		
5	Inquiry helps us improve	I believe engaging in [INQUIRY ROUTINES] will help us improve [NETWORK PROBLEM]
8	Learns improvement tools	Learning how to use improvement tools and methods (e.g., [INQUIRY ROUTINES], analyzing data)
6	Values access to new ideas	Getting access to new ideas from colleagues at other schools or from researchers associated with the network

Reference

Rohanna, K. (2022). Extending evaluation capacity building theory to improvement science networks. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 43(1), 46–65.

Methods

We used quantitative methods of Rasch Rating Scale analysis and hierarchical linear modeling to construct a measure of member participatory benefits for school-based educators and analyze the reliability of this measure. The analyses utilized the responses of 2073 respondents to the Improvement Network Health and Development survey from 34 improvement networks in the 2022-2023 school year.

Findings

Our 9-item measure of member participatory benefits generated an individual reliability of 0.92 and also had high reliability in distinguishing among individuals within networks (0.84) and between networks (0.92). Figure 1 presents each network's mean and distribution of responses on the member participatory benefits measure. It shows the variability among the different networks by their spread across almost the entire scale.

Figure 1

Caterpillar plot of participatory benefits by network

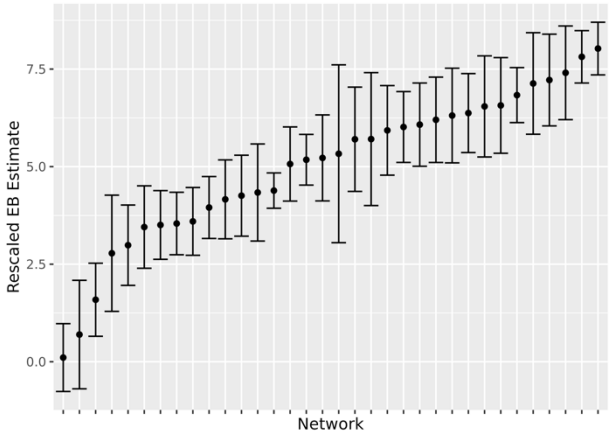
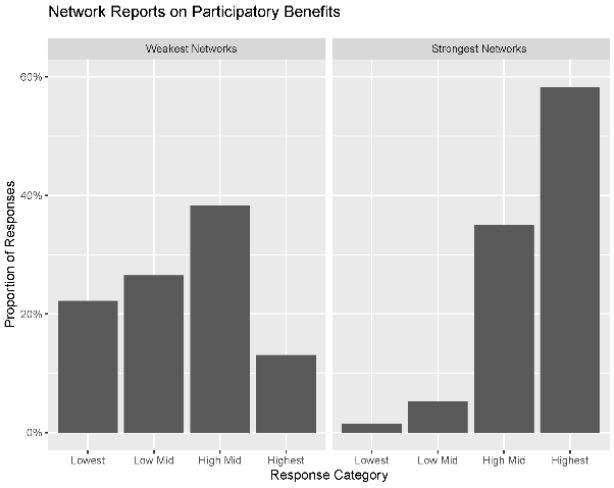


Figure 2 compares the distribution of response categories within the measure from the five least developed versus the five most developed networks. In the five lowest-scoring networks, more than 20% of the respondents fell into this lowest category. These individuals experienced few or no personal benefits in learning improvement methods and being socially connected to the community. And they do not endorse that the improvement network is making a difference for students and their school or that the network is worth their time. In contrast, almost 60% of the members in high-scoring networks express a great deal of value in learning improvement methods, gaining access to new ideas, and being socially connected in the community. They are willing to give up on other professional commitments to stay engage in the network.

Figure 2

Four-bar distribution of participatory benefits in the least and most developed networks



We found that member and network characteristics explain variation of educators' perceived participatory benefits. Members who are more engaged with and committed to their network report greater benefits. Many NICs created supportive environments to address inequitable educational practices for educators from minoritized backgrounds, garnering more positive benefit reports. Networks that value diverse expertise and safeguard time for school-based improvement teams to engage in their inquiry work and participate with the broader network reported greater benefits overall. We anticipate the use of this measure in assessing progress toward resolving persistent problems of practice for school-based educators.

Paper available at:

The Structure and Distribution of Leadership in the Hub Organizations of Improvement Networks

Donald J. Peurach, Elizabeth S. Jones, Megan Duff, Jennifer Zoltners Sherer, & Christopher Matthis

OVERVIEW

This paper uses responses from the spring 2024 administration of the Improvement Network Health and Development Survey to examine the role structure and team structure of hub leadership in improvement networks. The paper is one component of a broader program of research on hub leadership within the Improvement Network Health and Development Project. This broader program of research is motivated by (a) the central role of hub leadership as theorized within the Improvement Network Health and Development Framework (Russell et al, 2025) and (b) the lack of an existing literature focused specifically on hub leadership as a distinct category of educational leadership. Key aims include:

- Conceptualizing and theorizing hub leadership as a category of educational leadership.
- Constructing measures of hub leadership to incorporate into analyses of improvement networks as scientific-professional learning communities.
- Generating knowledge to support professional development and collegial learning for and among hub leaders.

THE PRACTICAL WORK OF HUB LEADERS

Our point of departure is a prior analysis in which we developed a conceptual framework for describing and analyzing the practical work of hub leadership (Peurach et al., 2025). Our prior analysis suggested that the practice of hub leaders is both complex and varied, and focused on seven core domains of work:

- Developing and sustaining the hub as an organization.
- Building and managing the improvement network as an organization.
- Supporting improvement activity within the network.
- Integrating equity into the network.
- Managing relationships external to the improvement network.
- Analyzing and improving the network as a learning system.
- “Putting out fires”, including addressing issues of:
    - Change management.
    - Systems alignment and integration.

MOTIVATING QUESTIONS

The paper currently under development is motivated by two questions: (1) How is the practical work of hub leadership distributed among leadership roles within hub organizations? (2) How are hub leadership *roles* aggregated into hub leadership *teams* within hub organizations? Answers to these questions will position us to begin theorizing about the knowledge demands on different hub leadership roles; the coordination demands among hub leaders; the authority structure and culture within hub leadership teams; and implications for network health and development.

COMPLICATING ISSUES

Our examination of the role and team structure of hub leadership is complicated by characteristics of the organizational and ecological contexts of improvement networks that, based on our prior analysis mentioned above, predict difficulty in discerning signal from noise: (1) improvement networks and hub organizations as *temporary adhocracies* that vary in their constitution and membership; and (2) the lack of an *institutionalized professional field* that brings structure to the preparation, roles, and work of hub leaders.

OUR ANALYSIS

Our analysis thus far has focused on developing typologies of:

- *Ostensive leadership roles* based on respondents' reports of (a) their membership on their hub leadership team and (b) their executive, administrative/managerial, and/or technical responsibilities as a member of the hub organization.
- *Enacted leadership roles* based on respondents' reports of the time they spend enacting the core domains of hub leadership practice detailed above.

Next steps in our analysis include:

- Comparing ostensive and enacted leadership roles for individual respondents.
- Examining the composition of hub leadership teams using our typologies of ostensive and enacted leadership roles.
- Exploring how the composition of hub leadership teams varies with the constitution of improvement networks (e.g., within-district or cross-district); the types of hub organizations (e.g., district-, university-, or NGO-based teams); the size of hub organizations; and the improvement problems on which networks are focused.

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Dynamic Perspectives on Equity in Networked Improvement

Paper available at:

Megan Duff, Vanderbilt University; Anna Premo, ETH Zurich;
Jennifer Zoltners Sherer, University of Pittsburgh

Networks for school improvement (NSI) have unique equity affordances, but there is variation in whether and how improvement networks enact their work in equitable ways toward equitable ends. In this study, we examined how hub leaders in 35 NSI within the Gates NSI initiative conceptualized and operationalized equity within network structures and routines.

Our initial analysis explored hub leaders' responses to increasingly urgent pressures around equity as captured in network documentation prepared for the Gates Foundation. Table 1 presents our framework for conceptualizing equity within improvement networks. This table contains four main equity dimensions within improvement networks and examples of key approaches hub leaders described. The table also reflects the stakeholder level at which equity strategies or tools were put into practice.

Table 1. A framework for conceptualizing and operationalizing equity across stakeholder groups within improvement networks.

	Students	Families & Communities	Educators	District Staff	Network Hub
OUTCOMES *Designing for network outcomes that are equitable across demographic characteristics such as race, socioeconomic status, and/or gender*					
Leveraging a range of academic and nonacademic data in network decisions			●	●	●
Focusing data analysis on variation in performance (e.g., data disaggregation, data platforms)			●	●	●
Designing and using practical measures			●		●
Measuring the impact of DEI work on network members and their students					●
OPPORTUNITY *Providing time, resources, and capacity-building opportunities for individuals to integrate equity in improvement*					
Designing equitable organizational structures (e.g., establishing an equity team)					●
Utilizing external expertise (e.g., partnerships, consultants)				●	●
Building capacity (e.g., book study, equity-focused professional learning, conferences, equity-focused coaching)			●	●	●
Using protocols and routines to support systems thinking			●		
Integrating equity into the network's social structures (e.g., equity-focused convenings/professional learning communities, equity-focused protocols)			●		
IDENTITY *Understanding one's own identity and potential biases; learning about and valuing the identities and experiences of others*					
Designing equitable organizational structures (e.g., hiring practices)					●
Integrating student/educator experience (e.g., empathy interviews, journey maps)			●		●
Engaging in adult identity work			●		●
Shifting adult mindsets/taking an asset-based stance (e.g., mitigating bias in root cause analysis)			●		●
POWER *Sharing voice and agency with those who are traditionally disempowered; challenging systems of oppression*					
Designing for equitable organizational structures (e.g., promotion criteria, meeting structures/protocols)				●	●
Engaging stakeholders in co-design (e.g., root cause analysis, network aim, theory of improvement, change ideas)			●		
Using data from students/parents/families (e.g., surveys, empathy interviews, focus groups)	●	●	●		
Engaging student voices in network structures (improvement teams, advisory groups, network convenings)	●	●			

Findings

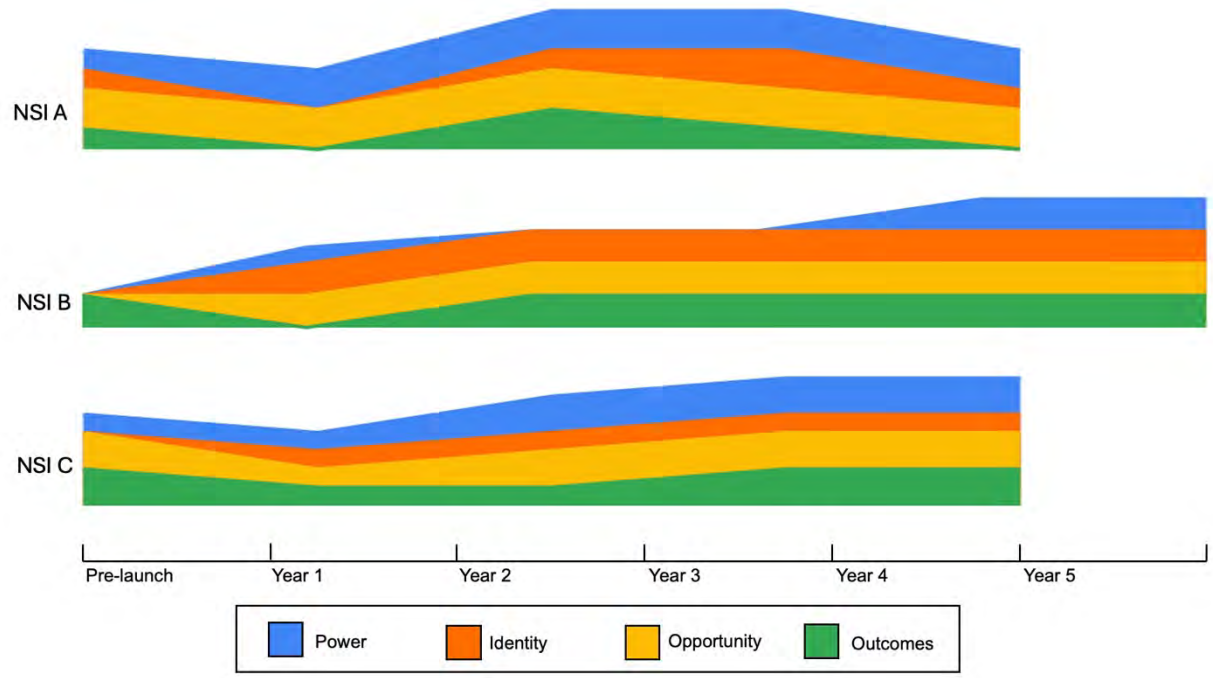
Our initial analyses revealed:

- All hub leaders attended to equity in descriptions of network practices; however, there was considerable variation in the dimensions of equity they described prioritizing and the practices they described within those dimensions.
- All hub leaders described practices related to equitable **outcomes** and many described providing **opportunities** for members and/or the hub to develop equity capacity. However, fewer described practices related to understanding **identity** and bias. We also found that while many hub leaders described prioritizing equity in the **power** domain (i.e., empowering network stakeholders in improvement processes), there was considerable variation in descriptions of which stakeholders were empowered and the seeming authenticity of described engagement.
- Nearly all hub leaders (94%) described approaches that attended to at least two equity dimensions, and nearly half (49%) prioritized three or more equity dimensions in documentation. Few hub leaders (15% of networks) prioritized strategies across all equity dimensions.
- Many hub leaders faced trade-offs (e.g., around time, buy-in, and capacity, etc.) in their efforts to integrate equity in improvement processes.

Continued Analysis

While our initial analysis considered networks' equity approaches holistically, networks demonstrated varying equity trajectories. That is, the strategies hub leaders described in network documentation suggest their equity conceptualization and approaches were evolving. We hypothesized that this evolution was in part mediated by shifting equity pressures and related capacity supports from the foundation alongside shifting equity policies and priorities within local districts.

Early Findings



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