

4H - Designing for High Engagement: Balancing Structure & Agency in Improvement Networks

April 1, 2025: 9-10:30 am PDT

PRESENTED BY:

- Angel Li, Carnegie Foundation
- Jennifer Zoltners Sherer, University of Pittsburgh
- Jennifer Lin Russell, Vanderbilt University

**NATIONAL SUMMIT
ON IMPROVEMENT
IN EDUCATION**

Community Norms

Join in creating a brave space that is safe for learning and growth.

Celebrate the work and push on the work.

Be candid and curious, even when it is uncomfortable.

Treat this space as a reunion and a welcome.

If you are a returner, welcome new people in. If you are new, contribute!

Center your why and bring your joy.

Be bold.

Bring your ideas and your energy to our collective work of building the field of improvement today and after.

Objectives

Consider aspects of network design that build high member engagement

Learn from each other by engaging with a real-world scenario

Consider a tool for measuring the benefits of network participation

Agenda

Designing for high
engagement:
An overview

Engage in a
collaborative
learning activity

Try out a tool to
measure member
participation

The Network Health Project Team



Vanderbilt Peabody
College

Jennifer Russell

Megan Duff

The logo for Vanderbilt University, featuring a gold 'V' and the text "VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY" in white on a black background.

University of
Pittsburgh

Jennifer Sherer

Christopher Matthis

Hanan Perlman

Anna Premo



The Carnegie Foundation for the
Advancement of Teaching

Angel Li

Anthony BryK

David Sherer

Mannong Pang



Carnegie Foundation
for the Advancement of Teaching

The University of Michigan

Donald Peurach

Elizabeth Jones



Who are you?

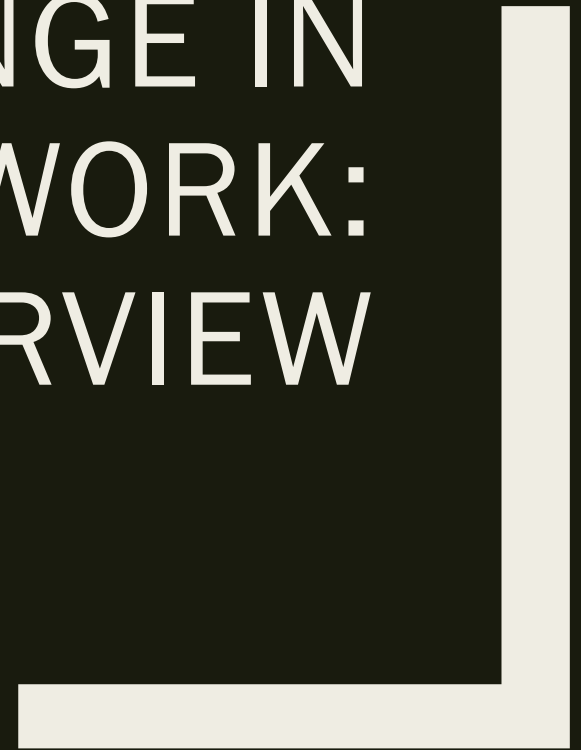
1 finger: If you are a network leader now

2 fingers: If you have been a network leader in the past

3 fingers: If you might launch a network

4 fingers: None of the above

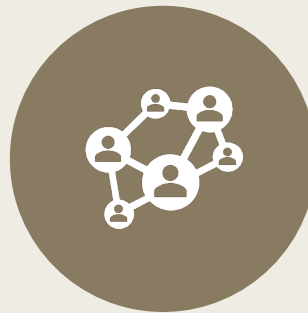
THE STRUCTURE AND
AGENCY CHALLENGE IN
IMPROVEMENT WORK:
AN OVERVIEW



The Network Health Project



FRAMEWORK TO UNDERSTAND
AND SUPPORT NETWORK
DEVELOPMENT

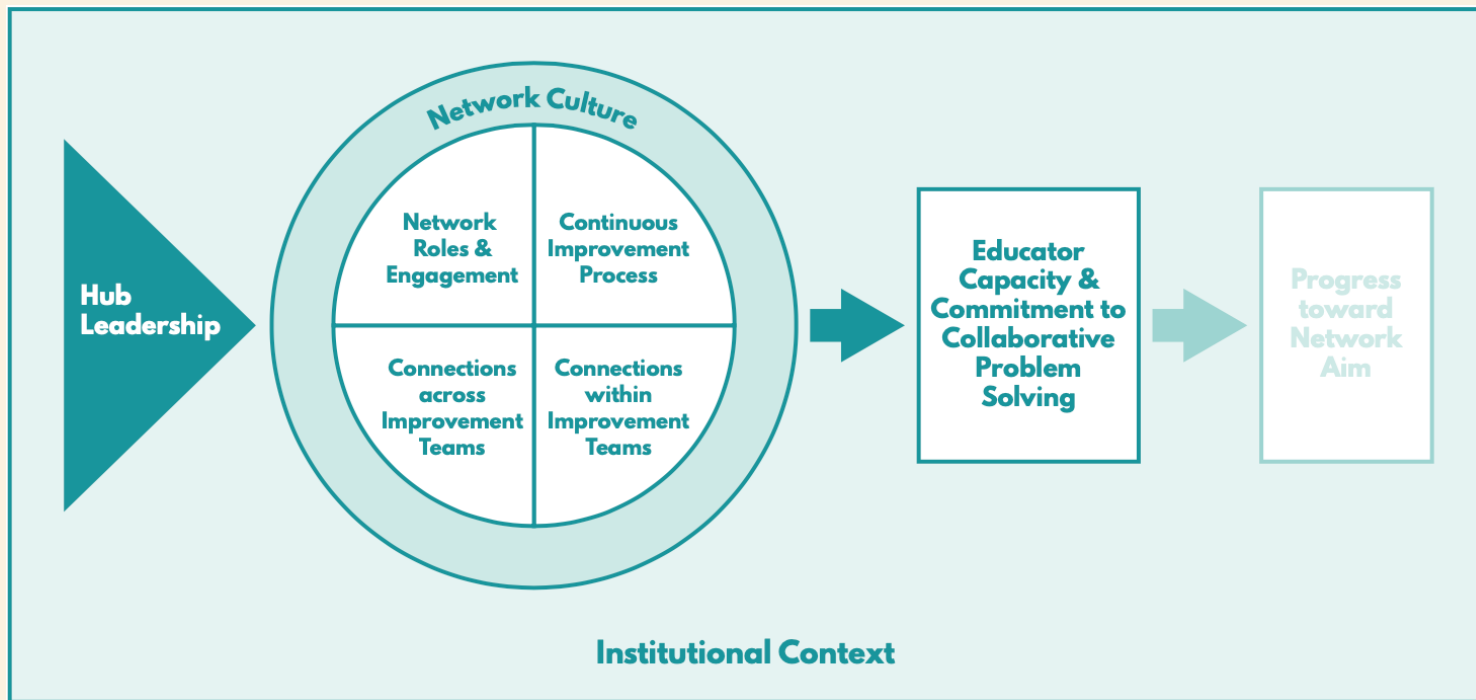


LEARNING FROM WELL-
DEVELOPED NETWORKS
(PJE ARTICLE)



STRUCTURE AND AGENCY
CHALLENGE

The Network Health & Development Framework



Learning from well-developed networks

- More sophisticated technical supports for improvement
- Greater capacity for social learning
- Standardized processes that balanced individual agency

Learning from well-developed networks

- More sophisticated technical supports for improvement
 - Very specific and iteratively refined working theories of improvement
 - Data tracking tools (college access dashboard, senior exit survey)
 - Systematic methods to consolidate learning from testing (change packages)
- Greater capacity for social learning
- Standardized processes that balanced individual agency

Learning from well-developed networks

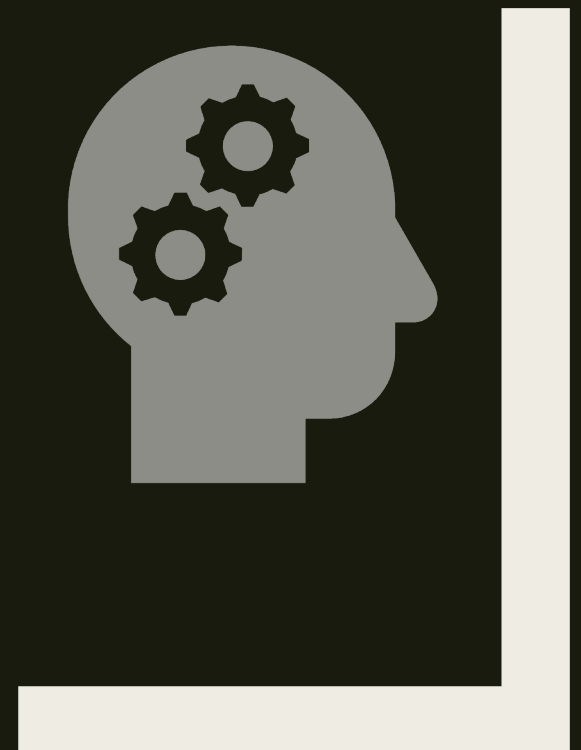
- More sophisticated technical supports for improvement
- Greater capacity for social learning
 - Robust coaching systems
 - Affinity groups
 - Ongoing refinement of collaborative routines to make improvement teams more effective
- Standardized processes that balanced individual agency

Learning from well-developed networks

- More sophisticated technical supports for improvement
- Greater capacity for social learning
- Standardized processes that balanced individual agency
 - Tools to standardize coaching support across all schools while school-based improvement teams set their own improvement priorities and selected which strategies to test

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION, PART 1

- How do you balance structure and agency in your improvement work?
- As you grapple with this balance, what is the biggest challenge you face?



COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING TASK

MOVE INTO TRIADS

- Find two people you do not know
- Sit in a circle
- Introduce yourself:
 - *Name*
 - *Organization*
 - *What you like about doing improvement work*



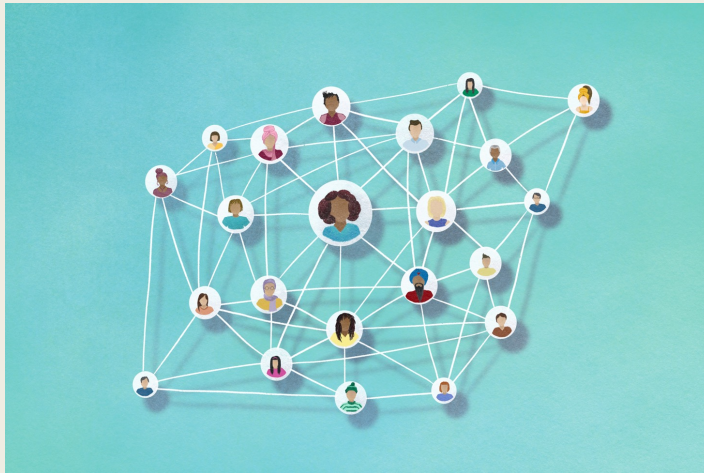
SCENARIO



Context

- **Setting:** An improvement network in a high-accountability urban school district that initially comprised 10 high school improvement teams and is expected to continue expanding.
- **Problem of Practice:** Low math proficiency among high school students.

At the beginning, network leaders—who include both district and school leaders—attempted to signal to schools that this network aims to break through the high-accountability district culture and foster an improvement culture by making everything participant-driven.



Triad discussion:

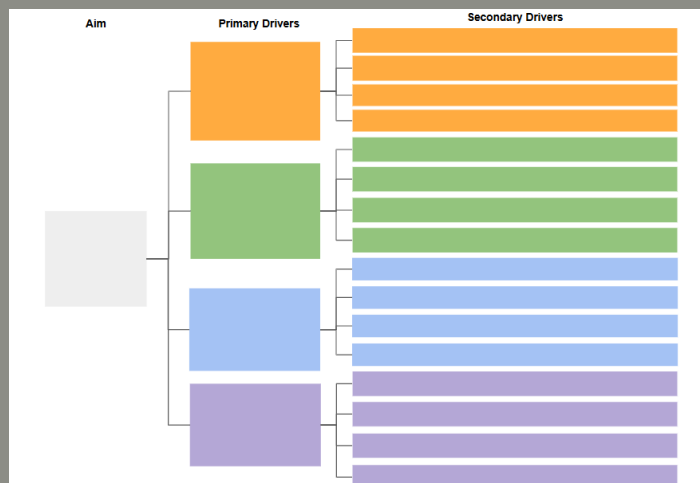
How might network leaders build a participant-driven network?

Consider:

- Participation structures
- Power dynamics
- Ownership

From problem investigation to theory development, the 10 school teams were empowered to make decisions that aligned with their school improvement goals and context factors.

This resulted in an initial theory of improvement with four vastly different primary drivers and 16 diverse secondary drivers.

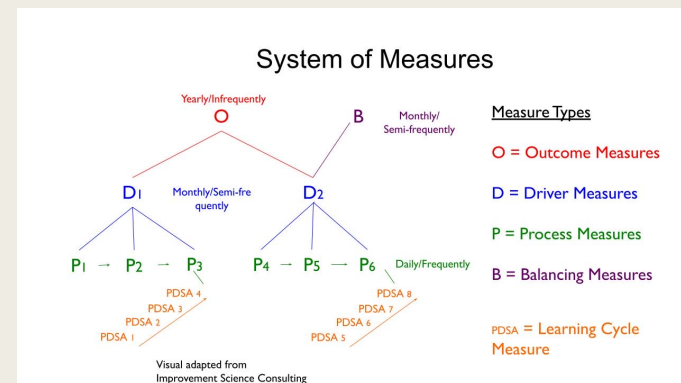


Triad discussion:

Given this design choice, how would you (as a network leader) orchestrate learning within and across improvement teams?

Consider:

- **Organizing for Learning:** What structures and routines support learning within and across teams?
- **Measurement:** How do teams measure their improvement progress? How does network measure collective progress toward the aim?

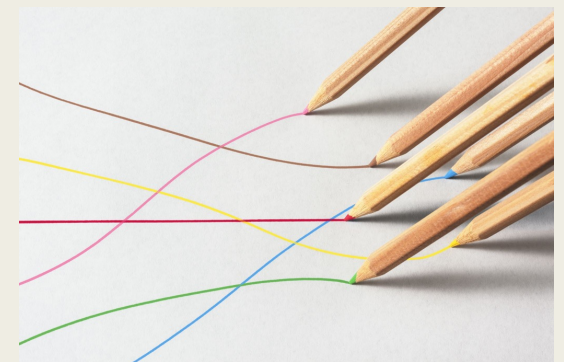


Schools were **allowed to design and test change ideas related to any of the secondary drivers**. The rationale behind this approach is twofold:

- 1) Network leaders aim to build **buy-in** from schools, believing that **buy-in** is a pre-condition to the active engagement necessary to build improvement capacity.
- 2) Network leaders want to ensure that the improvement process includes people closest to the work in the decision making.

Six months later, the schools were testing a wide range of ideas representing **very different paths** within the theory of improvement.

- A few school teams had completed multiple PDSA cycles on a single change idea and even reached out to other schools with similar change ideas to find out what others were learning, facilitating their own cross-team learning routines.
- Other schools had their teams working on multiple change ideas—sometimes within a single secondary driver and other times across multiple secondary drivers.
- Meanwhile, a handful of schools struggled to create the space needed for their team to complete a full PDSA cycle.



After the network had been running for a year, the district wanted to see the **impact** of the improvement work and consider next steps for **expansion** to additional schools.

Seeing variation in the uptake of the work across schools, network leaders decided to build on the work where there was the most momentum and **push school teams toward the drivers and change ideas backed by the strongest evidence**—specifically, the teams that had successfully scaled within and across schools.

As a result, some schools felt **disrespected and experienced a breach of trust**, leading them to disengage.

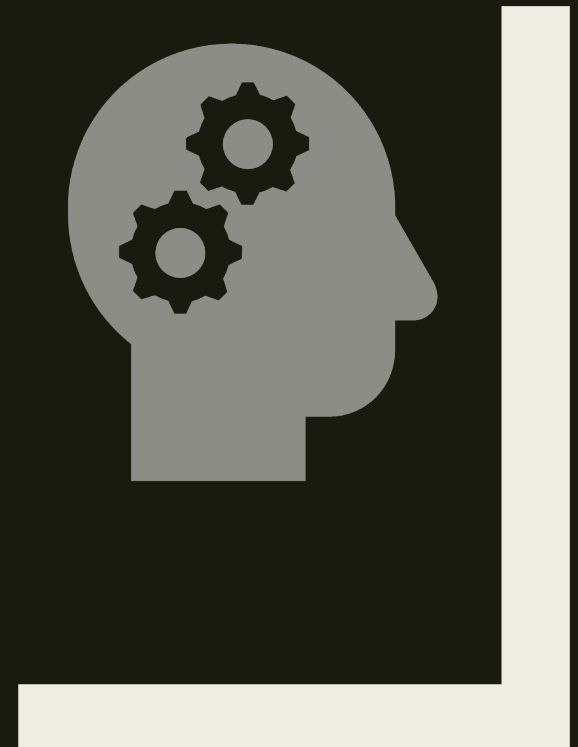
Now, network leaders must focus on re-engaging disengaged schools, keep engaged schools involved, and bringing new schools into the network.

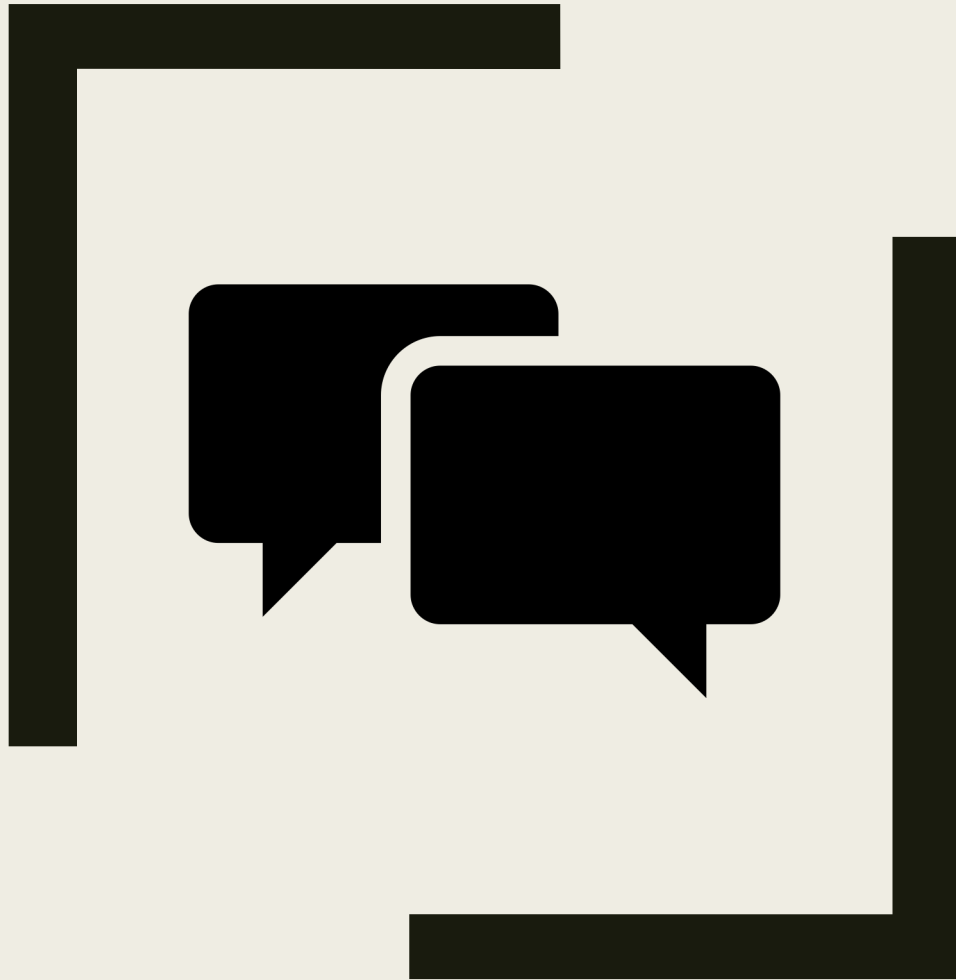
Triad discussion:

- What went wrong in this scenario?
- What is at the core of the challenges the network leaders were facing?
- How might this scenario play out differently depending on the problem the network is trying to solve (e.g., improving classroom instruction vs. reducing chronic absenteeism vs. supporting student pathways to college?)
- What are the tradeoffs network leaders face when designing for structure and agency?

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION, SCENARIO

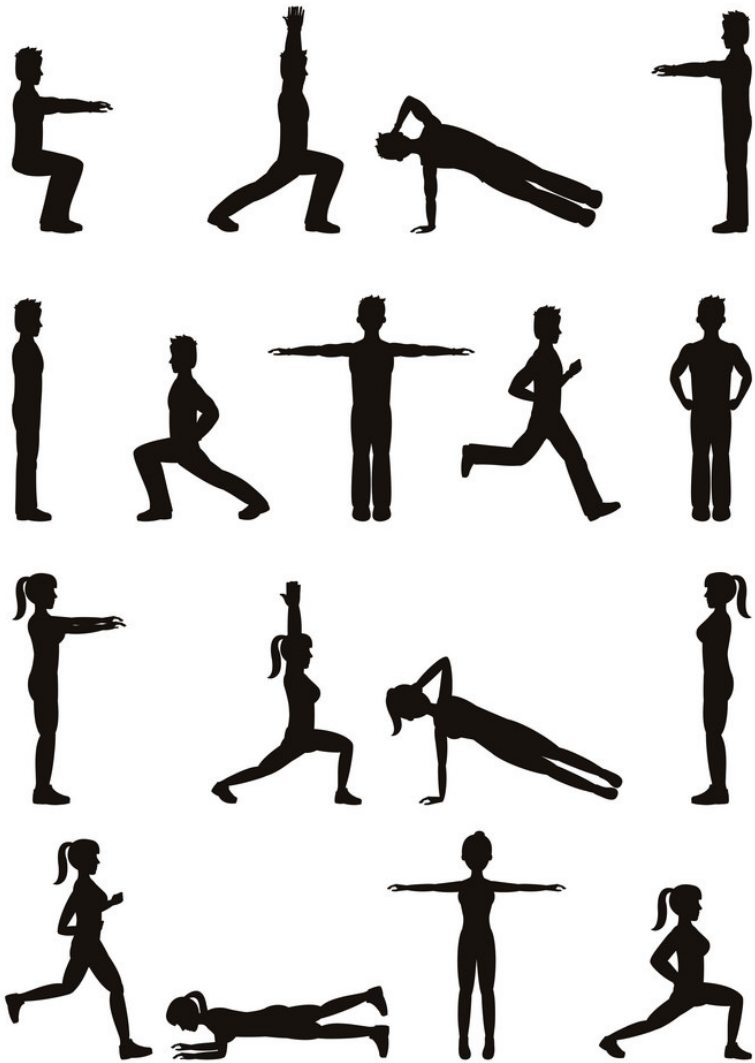
- How does your identity influence your perspective on these challenges?
- Have you encountered a similar situation in your work? How did you handle it? If you could go back, would you handle it differently? If so, how and why?
- How did this activity deepen your understanding of the tension between structure and agency?





WHOLE GROUP DISCUSSION

Share out: What are the tradeoffs
hub leaders face when designing for
structure and agency?



GROUP STRETCH

OPTIMIZING PARTICIPATION BENEFITS

Measuring member participation experiences



Potential indicators of participation benefits in improvement networks



Members feel participation is generally worthwhile and valuable



Members see benefits in the collective pursuit of a specific improvement aim



Members believe they are expanding their professional capacity

Network members who are more engaged with their networks report greater benefits



School-based improvement team leads who have added responsibilities tend to offer more positive accounts than their team members



Individuals who participate more regularly in school-based improvement team meetings also report greater benefits



Stronger reports were offered by network members with a greater length of tenure in their network

How perceptions of participation varied across networks

- *In longer operating networks, educators reported greater benefits*
- *Members in single-district networks offered more negative response*
- *Members in hubs organized and operated by institutions of higher education (IHE) offered more positive reports of their participatory benefits*
- *Members in networks who focused on an improvement goal of early warning and response had more positive experiences when compared to instructional networks or ones that focused on post-secondary well match.*



Members feel participation
is generally worthwhile and
valuable

A SURVEY TOOL TO MEASURE PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE

- I value the opportunity to be part of [NETWORK NAME]
- [NETWORK NAME] is worth the time it takes
- I am willing to give up other professional commitments to stay engaged in this network



Members see benefits in the collective pursuit of a specific improvement aim

A SURVEY TOOL TO MEASURE PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE

- I believe our work is making a difference for the students we serve
- The work we do in this network has the potential to improve of [NETWORK PROBLEM] at our school(s)
- Feeling a part of a larger community aiming to accomplish something important together



Members believe they are
expanding their
professional capacity

A SURVEY TOOL TO MEASURE PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE

Benefit: Strengthening individual capabilities in
support of collaborative problem solving

- I believe engaging in [INQUIRY ROUTINES] will help us improve [NETWORK PROBLEM]
- Learning how to use improvement tools and methods (e.g., [INQUIRY ROUTINES], analyzing data)
- Getting access to new ideas from colleagues at other schools or from researchers associate with the network

Participatory benefits:
A survey tool to measure the experience of improvement network members

How much added value, if any, have you experienced in terms of:	none	a little	a moderate amount	a lot	a great deal
Learning how to use improvement tools and methods (e.g., [INQUIRY ROUTINES], analyzing data)					
Getting access to new ideas from colleagues at other schools or from researchers associated with the network					
Feeling a part of a larger community aiming to accomplish something important together					

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements about your work in this network:	do not agree	slightly agree	moderately agree	agree	strongly agree
I believe our work is making a difference for the students we serve					
I believe engaging in [INQUIRY ROUTINES] will help us improve [NETWORK PROBLEM]					
The work we do in this network has the potential to improve [NETWORK PROBLEM] at our school(s)					

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:	do not agree	slightly agree	moderately agree	agree	strongly agree
I value the opportunity to be part of [NETWORK NAME]					
[NETWORK NAME] is worth the time it takes					
I am willing to give up other professional commitments to stay engaged in this network					

A SURVEY TOOL TO MEASURE PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION, PART 2

- Read the survey questions
- Reflect on today's session:
 - What is one thing you will take away from this session?
 - What is one question you still have?



Objectives

Consider aspects of network design that build high member engagement

Learn from each other by engaging with a real world scenario

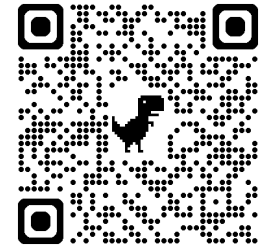
Consider a tool for measuring the benefits of network participation

Whole group reflection

- What will you take away from this session?
- What questions do you still have?

Thank you for learning with us

Learn more about
The Network Health Project at
improvementnetworks.org



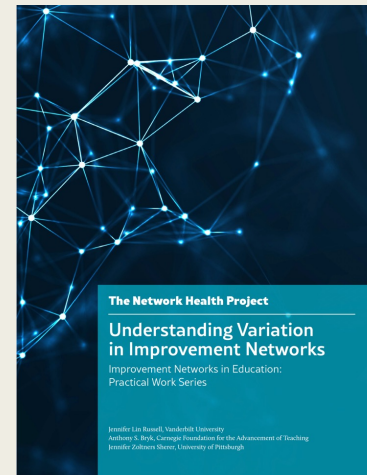
Jenn Russell
jennifer.russell@vanderbilt.edu



Angel Li
angli@carnegiefoundation.org



Jen Sherer
jzsherer@pitt.edu



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Measuring Educators' Perceived Benefits of Participation in Educational Improvement Networks

Hanan Perlman^a, Anthony S. Bryk^b, and Jennifer Lin Russell^c

^aUniversity of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA; ^bCarnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Princeton, NJ; ^cVanderbilt University, Nashville, TN

ABSTRACT
Networked improvement communities (NICs) aim to build capacity for school-based educators to work collaboratively as active agents of problem solving and change. Yet, the benefits accrued to educators from participating in improvement networks have been sparsely researched. 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. We hypothesize that such commitment and motivation are necessary conditions for precipitating changes in schooling practices that will ultimately lead to progress toward network improvement aims (e.g., improved student outcomes). Our analyses provide evidence that our measure of members' participatory benefits can reliably distinguish among individuals both within and between networks. We identify distinct individual and network characteristics that are associated with variations in member reports of their participatory benefits.

Networked improvement communities (NICs) support educators in working to improve educational practices and expand learning opportunities for students. NICs are intentionally structured communities in which school-based educators have opportunities to learn and improve their practice through rigorous, focused, and collaborative continuous improvement processes with diverse colleagues and experts, both within their schools, in other schools, and in other organizations (Bryk et al., 2015; Yurkofsky et al., 2020). Ideally, we expect that participation in NICs enables network members to learn problem-solving processes and to work collaboratively to enact the routines and practices of a scientific-professional learning community to improve educational outcomes (Russell et al., 2019, 2025, this issue).

NICs aim to transform typical school improvement processes by putting educators at the center of efforts to find new ways to optimize educational processes and meet the needs of students. NICs create collaborative routines and structures within and across schools that offer opportunities for shared learning about pressing problems of practice. In contrast to externally developed and/or mandated interventions, NICs aim to develop educators' capacities and commitments to be active agents of change by engaging in collaborative problem solving (Russell et al., 2025).

CONTACT Jennifer Lin Russell jennifer.russell@vanderbilt.edu Peabody College of Education and Human Development, Vanderbilt University, 230 Appleton Place, Nashville, TN 37203.
Throughout this article, in referring to NIC participants or members as "educators," we include teachers, instructional aides, administrators, principals, guidance counselors, instructional coaches, and others in schools. We do not include the leaders and staff members in the hub organizations that serve as the operational center of NICs.
Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/01615593.2025.2448444>
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Thank You

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