



**Effective Collaboratives,
Networks and
Communities of
Practice:
Lessons Learned**



Planning and Managing Effective Networks

Updated June 2016

Effective collaboratives, communities of practice and grantee networks are a core service offering for Education First. We believe our effectiveness as partners and facilitators derives from our extensive research and experience about what makes a network work. This deck, compiled in 2015 from a series of resources prepared for individual clients across multiple years, summarizes some of our deep thinking about the conditions, opportunities and challenges for successful networks.

Please contact [Jenn Vranek](#) to learn more about Education First's approach to networks and collaboration.

About Us:

Education First is a national, mission-driven strategy and policy organization with unique and deep expertise in education improvement. Our mission is to deliver exceptional ideas, experience-based solutions and results so all students – and particularly low-income students and students of color – are prepared for success in college, career and life. We work closely with policymakers, practitioners, funders and advocates to design and accelerate policies and plans that support strong systems, outstanding educators, engaged students and effective investments.

Networks 101

Not every group is a network...



- **What:** Many different organizations working in concert
- **Who:** Organizations, institutions, governmental agencies, corporations, foundations, etc.
- **Why:** Around a common defined purpose
- **How:** As equal partners

Networks do not automatically produce cost savings – in some cases networks require considerable investment

Networks are best created on a basis of trusted partners; easier to begin one where relationships already exist

Create them only when the synergy of a network is likely to move the work ahead farther and faster than individual organizations working alone

Networks must have shared goals and shared accountability

Every partner-participant and resource/TA provider must get ongoing value or they will disengage

Create clear parameters at the outset

Source(s): Education First analysis

Networks serve multiple purposes; form should follow function.

Develop or
enhance tacit
knowledge

Develop or
enhance technical
knowledge

Disseminate
information and
build awareness

Reach mutually
agreed-upon
goals

Go to scale

Introduce new
program or
approach

Provide political
cover for difficult
work

Create a
movement

Source(s): Education First analysis; interviews with Reform Support Network, CORE and Math in Common network participants

A network's structure and intensity of investment will vary based on the participants' desired outcomes.



Source(s): Education First analysis; interviews with Reform Support Network, CORE and Math in Common network participants

We've run dozens of successful networks; these five illustrate the breadth and depth of our work.

Novo Foundation's Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI)

Partnership between the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and 12 urban districts to raise district capacity to implement strategies that enhance social-emotional learning

High Quality Assessment Project (HQAP)

Funder collaborative awarding grants and providing technical assistance to a network of local/state advocacy organizations in 15 states and national organizations educating about high quality assessments

Reform Support Network (RSN)

Network created by the U.S. Department of Education to offer technical assistance and resources to Race to the Top state grantees on teacher and leader effectiveness, including educator preparation and data

CCSSO's Implementing College and Career Standards (ICCS) Initiative

Collaborative of CCSSO member states working in small teams (workgroups) with national experts to discuss and share resources and strategies for implementing college- and career-ready standards

Core to College

Network of states committed to developing a common definition of college and career readiness, using standards-aligned assessments, and improving collaboration between K-12 and higher education systems

Successful networks take on a range of activities.

Network Practices	CDI	HQAP	RSN	CCFWG	Core to College	Proposed CoP
Regular in-person network convenings	X	X	X	X	X	X
Resource-sharing and common tools	X	X	X	X	X	X
Periodic virtual webinars	X	X	X	X		X
Connections to national experts	X	X	X	X	X	X
1:1 coaching	X	X	X		X	
Role-alike workgroups	X				X	?
Topical workgroups	X	X	X		X	X
Grant management	X	X		X	X	
Strategy design and implementation	X	X		X	X	
Publications	X	X	X	X	X	X

Networks: NoVo Foundation’s [Collaborative Districts Initiative \(CDI\)](#), [High Quality Assessment Project \(HQAP\)](#), [Reform Support Network \(RSN\)](#), [Common Core Funders Working Group \(CCFWG\)](#), [Core to College](#), [Teacher Preparation Transformation Centers Community of Practice \(proposed\)](#)

Strong networks come together around a common goal, share social and operational norms and are involved at different levels in the network

Participants make firm commitments to participate

Network conveners ensure participants understand key network commitments. Network-wide meetings are planned well in advance, and participants put dates on their district calendar and view convening attendance as a high priority.

Clear definitions of success are provided upfront

Participants enter the RFP process **with a clear understanding of how their success will be measured (goals, metrics, etc.)**. Districts only submit applications if they are on board with the metrics.

Participants have capacity and right mindset

Participants understand they are at differing levels of progress from each other, but **are willing to both learn and share learnings with others**. Participants are willing and able to make systems change.

Participants engage in teams, including leadership

Districts have steering teams that oversee the work and a dedicated project manager. Teams attend each convening, with participants at multiple levels of leadership. The highest levels of district leadership are not at every meeting, but understand and are informed of the effort.

Source(s): Education First analysis: Reform Support Network, CORE, Math in Common; interviews with CAO, foundation program officers, urban districts

School districts in K12 networks tell us that strong networks engage participants in multiple ways, with multiple people, and are action-oriented

Strong networks are more than convenings

The best networks **include full-network, multi-day convenings; special-topic seminars** (e.g., one-day meetings) and **webinars; coaching and 1:1 technical assistance**; policy briefs and curated tools/resources made by participants and national organizations.

Strong networks are responsive

Participants drive network topics and activities; feedback loops are used frequently; intermediaries and TA providers able to change course as needed. While dates and high-level topics are carefully selected far in advance to enable district planning, flexibility is key to address needs.

Strong networks are about doing, not just listening or learning

Participants, intermediaries and TA providers are held accountable for generating real outcomes, not only attending events. A large focus is placed execution and change management, so that participants can implement their learnings in their contexts.

Strong networks provide quality opportunities for relationship building

The network is **intentionally structured so that participants can build trusting, collegial relationships** between each other, and with the technical assistance providers. Participants feel ownership over network activities and success.

Source(s): Education First analysis: Reform Support Network, CORE, Math in Common; interviews with CAO, foundation program officers, urban districts

Strong networks properly prepare and convene participants in person at key times, around an engaging agenda

Networks use convenings thoughtfully

Though convenings are only one aspect of networks activities, they often engender the most love (and frustration!) among participants. **Strong networks convene “just in time” and do not over-convene.**

Networks provide a combination of activities at convenings

A blend of activities, such as panels to introduce new topics, case studies of models to discuss, role-alike groups and mini presentations across districts to share practices, **and team time** to synthesize learnings and next steps can engage and challenge participants.

Networks provide participants relevant pre-work

Strong pre-readings enable leaders to tee-up the topic in their district before the convening, so their teams can implement when they return. Participants use pre-work to go to the convening with a “game plan” for learning tied to their district needs.

Source(s): Education First analysis: Reform Support Network, CORE, Math in Common; interviews with CAO, foundation program officers, urban districts

Examples of Successful Networks

Cooperating

Coordinating

Network	Description	Formation and Structure	District Activities
<p>Council of Great City Schools (CGCS)</p>	<p>68 large city school districts promoting the cause of urban schools and advocating for inner-city students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Initially created as a networking and study group in 1956, the Council today has grown into a national education policy and research organization ▪ School districts eligible for membership based on urban characteristics. ▪ Has an Executive Committee, along with three subcommittees to provide support in financial and organizational areas ▪ The Board of Directors is composed of the Superintendent and one Board of Education member from each member district ▪ Has five special task forces to address major issues facing big-city school district ▪ In addition to these governing bodies, a network of deans of the Great City Colleges of Education and staff liaisons from various school district departments encourage information exchange with counterparts in other cities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provides a network for school districts sharing common problems to exchange information, and to collectively address new challenges as they emerge in order to deliver the best possible education for urban youth ▪ Has fall annual meetings as well as legislative/policy meetings ▪ Hosts meetings for various positions in school districts (e.g., Bilingual, Immigrant and Refugee Education Directors Meeting)
<p>Math in Common <i>(managed by California Education Partners)</i></p>	<p>Ten districts supporting K-8 educators to implement the Common Core</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Districts selected via closed RFP process ▪ Districts funded to send teams of 5-10 to participate in the network, including a project lead and a high level cabinet member at the district ▪ California Education Partners facilitates convenings and cross-district interactions ▪ Third party evaluator (WestEd) assesses the initiative ▪ Funder has monthly calls with each district and with facilitator and evaluator, and attends most in-person and virtual events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Quarterly in-person convenings in rotating locations across California; includes sessions led by experts and speakers ▪ Summer principal institutes for professional learning and collaboration ▪ Cross district site visits (3-4 times annually) ▪ Opt-in events, as needed ▪ Monthly update calls with funder

Source(s): Education First analysis: Reform Support Network, CGCS, CORE, Math in Common; interviews with CAO, foundation program officers, urban districts

Examples of Successful Networks

Coordinating

Coordinating

Network	Description	Formation and Structure	District Activities
Urban District Leadership Network	13 large urban districts advancing implementation of the Common Core State Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Includes four coordinated networks: (1) the Urban Superintendents/CEO Network (2) Chief Academic Officers Network (3) Urban Literacy Leadership Network and (4) Urban Mathematics Leadership Network Math and literacy networks cut across a few levels of staff, including content leads, area supervisors, principals Aspen Institute for Education and Society facilitates meetings Aspen gathers district needs from CEO meetings to inform convening topics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Each of the four networks (Superintendents/ CEOs, CAO, Mathematics Leadership and Literacy Leadership) convene twice per year Convenings include pre-readings, discussing problems of practice, consultancies CAO, math and literacy networks help direct one of the two convenings; convening includes independent and collaborative activities Some informal interactions in between sessions
CA K-8 NGSS Early Implementation Initiative	Eight districts advancing implementation of the Next Generation Science Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Districts selected via a closed RFP process WestED’s K-12 Alliance facilitates district convenings and leads evaluation of overall initiative and the network Districts bring core leadership teams of 10-12, including a project director, principals and teachers Districts project directors collaborate with WestED K-12 Alliance regional directors to plan convenings based on district need 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Districts participate in 2-3 convenings annually WestED’s K-12 Alliance provides 5-7 technical assistance coaching meetings with district teams Districts participate in two lesson study activities per district; each lesson study consists of one day of planning and one day of implementation

Source(s): Education First analysis: Reform Support Network, CGCS, CORE, Math in Common; interviews with CAO, foundation program officers, urban districts

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Collaborating

Network	Description	Formation and Structure	District Activities
<p>SCALE Up <i>(managed by California Education Partners)</i></p>	<p>Six districts pooling practice and resources; first 2 years focus on early childhood (TK-2) literacy and ELL achievement gap</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Six rural California superintendents formed a collaborative, partnering with a TA provider (California Education Partners) Districts’ Design Team and teachers develop and implement TK-2 CCSS-aligned assessment Districts’ Data Director helps districts create Data System to track formative and summative results with eye toward ELL achievement gap Design Team helps teachers form SCALE Up PLCs and use Data System assessment data to drive instruction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Biweekly Design Team meetings with CA Ed Partners for coaching and strategizing A Comprehensive Summit Team meets three times per year to review and plan next steps Bimonthly trainings for Design Teams led by the Data Director geared toward effectively interpreting and using Data System data Design Teams lead monthly on-site PLCs with districts to share strategies learned at the Data Director-led trainings Summit Team meets yearly at Stanford University to share ELL outcomes with Stanford ELL Leadership Network Executive Board performs reviews every six months, approving data-sharing plans and recommending new work
<p>California Office to Reform Education (CORE)</p>	<p>Ten districts advancing Common Core, improving educator effectiveness and building systems alignment via shared data</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Came together to jointly submit an NCLB waiver, which they did not receive, but then later did get Members are a “coalition of the willing” and mostly large districts (jointly serve >\$1M students) Membership teams from each district include the superintendent, CAO, and district department heads Articulated common mission, goals and strategies Superintendents form the Board of Directors; Staff runs the day-to-day operations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quarterly Board meetings of district superintendents to review budget and program implementation Biannual School Quality Improvement System Oversight Panel meetings to discuss districts’ peer-reviewed self evaluations Cross district convenings targeting teaching strategies (e.g. formative assessment) and content (e.g. Core Arts Standards), as needed Pair high and low performing schools to initiate peer learning

Source(s): Education First analysis: Reform Support Network, CGCS, CORE, Math in Common; interviews with CAO, foundation program officers, urban districts

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Thank you!
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