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Think piece

What are we
learning about...?

LEA involvement in school networks

Improving schools through networks

A new approach to urban school reform (summary)

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Networked Learning Communities

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Improving schools through networks

Many schools simply do not have the capacity to improve on their own. In America, a few school districts are experimenting with new approaches to school reform that rely on collaboration between schools. This paper draws on data from an evaluation of the Annenberg Challenge in Los Angeles, a reform effort that experimented with school networks as a vehicle for improving schools. The authors found that when school networks created structures that decentralised power and distributed organisational resources and leadership throughout the network, they also enhanced schools' capacity for reform. ☐

Improving schools through networks

A network, as described in this paper, is a group of organisations working together to solve problems or issues of mutual concern that are too large for any one organisation to handle on its own *(Mandell, 1999)*. This suggests that schools working together in a collaborative effort would be more effective in enhancing organisational capacity and improving student learning than individual schools working on their own *(Wohlstetter & Smith, 2000)*.

The purpose of this research study was to explore school-to-school networks as a vehicle for enhancing the organisational capacity of schools, while also mitigating some of the problems associated with decentralisation in low-capacity environments.

The study context

The Annenberg Foundation awarded five-year grants to a number of the largest urban areas in the United States in 1993. The grants were available to enable schools to link together and to 'encourage member schools to learn from and support one another', spreading 'the exercise of accountability across schools'. Grant recipients were encouraged to pursue school networks as a vehicle for helping to co-ordinate reform efforts, and for spreading innovations from one network school to another *(Schon & McDonald, 1998)*. Thus, Annenberg's principle of networks was predicated on the idea that when stakeholders of a school community make connections with other schools by sharing ideas, experiences and strategies, they are able to achieve outcomes not possible when working independently.

Within the Los Angeles programme, school networks were defined as groups of cross-phase schools. This was to encourage collaboration across grades, schools and disciplines and to help provide some stability and coherence to the educational system. The 'school families' (as they were called) were expected to be composed of five to seven schools located in one district. They were also expected to work with an external partner and individual school families determined which partner(s) they consulted and for what purposes. Through the school network, participants – especially parents and professional educators – would share information about curriculum, teaching and students. This sharing was viewed as essential for reducing school isolation and enhancing organisational capacity.

The Annenberg Challenge reform initiative was designed to improve student achievement, and networks chose their own strategies for achieving that goal. The networks were expected to generate 'tightly linked teams of professionals' to facilitate sustained conversations about practice and continuous improvement. There was an expectation that team members would be drawn from all the schools in the families and from all members of the school community, including parents, teachers and principals. It was not originally anticipated that the school families would require additional leadership, but that principals would handle the increased interaction within their own schools and with other schools in the network.

Research suggests that efforts to improve organisational performance and capacity will only be successful if stakeholders are actively involved in the improvement process *(Lawler, 1991)*. The limited research on school networks suggested that the opportunity to collaborate with other schools through a network structure fosters a sense of trust and commitment between participants. However, collaboration alone is not enough to create changes in school norms and practices *(Kahne et al, 2001)*. Kahne et al found that reform efforts throughout the network were often unco-ordinated, lacked coherence and were only marginally related to the business of teaching and learning. A focus on teaching and learning was felt to be key to the effectiveness of school-to-school networks.

In a review of research on networks outside education, *(Robertson, 1998)* further highlighted that collaborative relationships are only likely to be initiated and maintained under certain conditions. Appropriate incentives and clear potential benefits are two of these. Willingness on the part of organisations is another, where members must trust one another and be committed to the shared endeavour. Additionally, organisations (and their members) needed the ability and capacity (knowledge and skills, resources and information) to collaborate in a network. Furthermore, stakeholders must be involved in the management of the network and there needs to be wide ownership within the organisation of network operations, goals and ongoing achievements.

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The research design and results

A range of data collection strategies were used in the research and these were intended to yield both factual and qualitative information about the four school families, the perceptions of the participants and the impact of the school families on school reform. The researchers conducted individual interviews and focus groups and observed team meetings and members.

The four case study networks (school families) created a variety of work teams to conduct the business of reform. The work teams across the sample networks were remarkably similar to one another and resembled, in mission, the types of teams that private sector firms create to improve their organisational capacity.

> **The school families created three types of work teams to plan and implement improvements**
>
> 1 **Management teams:** to provide direction, management and oversight for the overall effort.
>
> 2 **Integrating team:** which were a special type of team that co-ordinated activities across various components of the school family that made decisions related to activities across schools.
>
> 3 **Improvement teams:** which were composed of both teachers and principals and focused on making improvements to teaching and learning in the areas prioritised in a learning plan.

All types of teams provided the organisational vehicle for diverse stakeholders to team up, formulate common goals and create and implement strategic plans for reform. They were therefore, able to collaborate in a way that would not have been likely in a traditional governance system.

As mentioned earlier, principals had originally been expected to handle the increased interactions of the network, but it soon became apparent that the add-on responsibilities were too time-consuming for principals to manage. All four appointed facilitators. Three of the four school families studied appointed a part-time school family facilitator, whereas one established a full-time position. In other words, although internal facilitation was not part of the original design, all four networks made a facilitator appointment.

Differences in the effectiveness of the four networks

Two of the networks selected their own school family facilitators and operated independently from the school district. In these families, teams were empowered to work collaboratively and make decisions about matters of consequence integral to the achievement of their learning plan goals. The other two networks appointed facilitators selected by their respective school district, making them directly accountable to the district. Differences in the effectiveness of the four networks can be explained, in part, by the varying degrees of autonomy afforded to facilitators and to the network teams.

Two of the school families tended to use team meetings for information dissemination rather than for decision-making. The decisions that tended to be made concerned matters of minor importance. In contrast, team meetings of the other two school families were characterised by shared leadership. Principals and sometimes teachers and parents chaired school family teams. In some cases, team leadership rotated periodically. In meetings of these teams, researchers observed more engagement on the part of members, greater levels of information sharing and instances of productive team decisions.

One of the distinctive differences observed between the successful and less successful networks was that the two that were more successful gathered information *for the family,* whereas those that were less successful disseminated information *to the family.* A second difference was between disseminating down to the network, rather than across the network.

In the two successful networks, team meetings provided members with a forum for sustained conversations about improvement efforts. A number of such teams were constituted and included overlapping team membership as a means of co-ordinating the work of teams. Internal facilitators and principals were often members of multiple teams and were able to provide cross-fertilisation of information.

One of the distinguishing characteristics between networks was the inventiveness around communication. While all four case study networks used traditional methods and dissemination (phone calls, faxes, newsletters and memos), the more successful also had dedicated bulletin boards in public places, a community newspaper, printed business cards for teachers and refrigerator magnets.

They also used a variety of online technologies to optimise communication. One network developed an 'evaluation task force' to analyse student data, teacher surveys, student surveys and parent evaluations, in order better to enable dissemination and information. The task force was designed to assess the school family's progress as they journeyed towards meeting their goals.

All four networks used extrinsic financial rewards in order to engage members. However, the presence of extrinsic financial rewards was not in itself a measure of success. Much more important in sustaining interest and involvement were other types of intrinsic rewards and decision-making capability. In fact, two of the families that used extrinsic rewards failed to sustain involvement because other practical rewards were lacking. Those that were successful in sustaining commitment were characterised by the warmth of relationships between members, the recognition of individual or group achievement and personal connections between team members.

Where unsuccessful, team meetings were characterised by the dissemination of information and routine decision-making, such that the outcomes were the same whether participants attended or not. The value of personal attendance (epitomised by contributions to the discussion, interpersonal relationships, shared decision-making and collaborative planning) was a characteristic of the more successful meetings. In such cases, socialising and sharing before meetings also characterised the interactions. Extrinsic and intrinsic non-financial rewards were evident. School and individual achievements were recognised and commitment and involvement between meetings was recognised. In these networks, teachers and administrators perceived collaboration as a reward in itself. As one teacher says:

> ❝ *We felt part of something – our views were taken into consideration.* ❞

In the two more successful networks professional development was incorporated into working processes where the process skills required of informal leaders facilitated collaborative working and information sharing between schools.

One facilitator noted that:

> ❝ *We wanted all members to know how to lead meetings because we have a floating chairperson.* ❞

In these networks, having these meeting facilitation skills meant that the teams spent more time diagnosing problems and situations.

Three of the networks had teams focused exclusively on professional development decisions. This provided numerous benefits for individual schools, enabling them to enhance their organisational capacity by sharing resources and training and development opportunities with other schools within their network. They were able to share developments and costs, while still providing professional development that was targeted and meaningful to teachers' and students' needs – and to the purposes of the network. This centralisation of professional development decision-making within networks also allowed for co-ordination and integration across schools, and brought coherence to the learning aspirations of the networks. Teachers and principals said that network-wide professional development offerings resulted in shared perspectives. One teacher noted that such network-wide sessions allowed teachers from different schools to develop a common language and to build, what one network facilitator described as a sense of 'family-ness'.

Discussion and implications

Two networks were particularly effective at creating network structures that decentralised power and distributed organisational resources throughout the network.

> **In the more successful networks the facilitators played three main roles**
>
> 1 Supporting organisational structures to connect schools within the network.
>
> 2 Obtaining and disseminating information within the network – being information brokers.
>
> 3 Mediating external pressures and facilitating the evolution of network responses rather than individual school responses.

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These three leadership roles are consistent with the traits of effective network leaders identified in the literature on networks in non-educational settings.

Although all four case study facilitators supported the development of the team structures, the two successful network facilitators built organisational structures that fostered members' participation by dispersing power broadly and building trust among schools. They supported the development of knowledge and skills and helped network members make 'smart' decisions.

The two successful facilitators worked as information brokers, obtaining and disseminating valuable information to stakeholders. They gathered information relevant to the network aspirations from outside sources and also worked to build infrastructures for disseminating information. They often visited schools personally to inform participants about network decisions and accomplishments.

These two facilitators buffered their organisations from district and state influences; they represented the interests of the networks, serving as network representatives to deal with external requirements. In contrast, the other two network facilitators tended to act as agents of their respective school districts.

A key issue in relation to the networks and school districts was the perception of the district. One school district had two less successful networks, who viewed the initiative as an avenue to enhance district reforms rather than as an opportunity to allow groups of schools, working through networks, to develop unique reforms for their own specific contexts.

The selection by this district of the network facilitators was a significant factor. Neither had been a school principal and yet both were perceived by the district as being able to co-ordinate the work of site-based educators. In contrast, the two successful networks had the authority to choose their own leaders and the power to make real decisions related to their local circumstances. They were able to identify a reform agenda separate from the district, including developing curricular, professional development and alternative student assessments. These networks also selected their own facilitators. In both cases this was a former principal from one of the network schools, already knowledgeable about the reform context and familiar with the professionals working within the network.

The organisational capacity that resulted from the participative network structures of the two successful networks allowed the stakeholders to develop new articulation strategies, to utilise technology for information dissemination and provide innovative professional development offerings. The two successful networks were empowered by their facilitators and their respective districts to make real decisions relating to unique aspiration and reform commitments, whereas the two less successful networks were empowered to make decisions only about matters of little consequence. □

End piece

The research presented in this article suggests that school networks may be effective vehicles for reform. They serve as mechanisms that can enhance organisational capacity when stakeholders throughout the network are actively involved in the reform effort and provided with the appropriate organisational resources.

The concept of school networks recently has surfaced as a prominent component of the reform agenda across the United States. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has a major initiative focused on promoting collaboratives of schools and school districts as a strategy for building organisational capacity. Similarly, Philadelphia's new reform effort features low-performing schools organised into clusters, working in partnership with non-profit community groups and for-profit educational management organisations *(Reid, 2002)*. Our research suggests that school networks such as these hold promise. With certain types of leadership and a supportive policy context, networks offer individual schools opportunities to connect with others who share similar goals. This can mitigate the problems associated with decentralised management and boost collective capacity for reform. □

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