Doing Deep Work Together
Lessons for Improving Network Collaboration

Angela Gong
H. Alix Gallagher

Collaborative networks that use continuous improvement principles and tools can accelerate and spread learning across sites and contexts. Districts face unprecedented challenges in meeting students' and families' needs in rapidly changing conditions. Collaborative networks can be powerful drivers of system improvement. Collaborating well is key to maximizing a network's effectiveness. This brief lays out three important lessons about how network members can work together: (a) Participants must understand the benefits of collaboration to overcome the "costs" inherent in working together; (b) collaboration requires a deliberately nurtured culture of trust and vulnerability; and (c) true collaborative work is different from "show and tell." These lessons help network leaders and members advance the quality of their work together to improve outcomes for students.

November 2020

PACE
Policy Analysis for California Education
CORE-PACE RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

Introduction

Continuous improvement has been growing in popularity as a data-informed and locally driven way to improve outcomes for students. While there are various levels of current understanding and implementation, at its core continuous improvement is a way for educators to look at how a system produces outcomes and to work across organizational tiers to test and find solutions that can succeed in diverse contexts.[1] Collaborative networks consisting of different organizations working together on continuous improvement can accelerate learning and spread solutions.

This accelerated knowledge spread is even more critical now, as schools and districts experiment with new ways to help all students learn.[2] In the context of COVID-19, education leaders around the world are working to respond to rapidly changing information, policies, needs, and pressures around how schools must adapt nimbly. More than ever, district leaders need ways to assess quickly how to best serve students, families, and teachers in their unique contexts.

While stress or crisis can force districts to pare down their priority lists, continuous improvement practices and working in networks can help schools and districts strengthen staff abilities, enhance system capacity, and improve student outcomes at times when resources are stretched ever thinner and urgent challenges keep arising.[3]

How can collaborative networks encourage actions that are required to do mutual work well? To understand better how network members can do impactful, productive work together, we scanned literature and interviewed experts. Three lessons drawn from this research are:

- **Lesson 1.** Participants must understand the benefits of collaboration to overcome the "costs" inherent in working together.

- **Lesson 2.** Collaboration requires a deliberately nurtured culture of trust and vulnerability.

- **Lesson 3.** True collaborative work is different from "show and tell."

These lessons may be helpful to participants in any kind of learning network but are most targeted at collaborative network leaders (including network coordinators, members, and team leaders within member organizations) working to establish or improve the conditions necessary to promote collaborative work. This brief[4] includes a short explanation of continuous improvement and how learning networks can contribute; an explanation of the methods used to distill the brief's lessons; and details about how each lesson can apply to those striving to establish true collaboration and improvement in collaborative networks.

Continuous Improvement and Learning Networks

Continuous improvement is a method of disciplined problem-solving. While several frameworks for continuous improvement exist, the basic premise is that practitioners analyze a system that produces a problematic outcome; engage a wide array of organizational stakeholders to test practices that address root causes of that outcome; and then spread successful solutions across the system.[5] Continuous improvement tools and perspectives can be applied to challenges on many scales—from a single classroom to multiple districts—and are well suited to fast-changing, ambiguous situations such as those schools face today.[6]

Education leaders and policymakers across the country are increasingly using continuous improvement as a way to achieve positive changes in schools. The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) uses continuous improvement concepts, and states nationwide have included continuous improvement language and practices in their ESSA plans.[7] In California, the state ESSA plan prompts counties, districts, and schools to adopt continuous improvement practices.[8] Moreover, funding and accountability shifts around the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) have pushed districts to become continuous improvement organizations.[9]

Learning networks can play a critical role in giving teams and organizations the support they need to bring to life continuous improvement cultures and practices. Learning networks are individuals or groups from different educational organizations (often schools or districts) that come together—usually under the coordination of a central leading organization (a "hub" or "backbone organization")—to accomplish one or more purposes, including to build professional connections; increase political power and/or legitimacy; create, share, or disseminate resources or data; provide or receive professional development or technical assistance; or address collectively a common problem of practice.[10]

This brief focuses on this last kind of network, sometimes called a collaborative network. In collaborative networks, members come together to study data, identify effective strategies, and adapt and adopt strategies for their own contexts.[11] The lessons in this brief are designed to help collaborative networks improve the work members do together by making that work more purposeful and useful in order to accelerate "aha" moments and improve outcomes for students. While the brief focuses on collaborative networks, the lessons here can be applied to new or developing networks of any kind as they look to build more effectively their own improvement processes.

Methods

To produce this brief, PACE interviewed four experts with extensive experience in building collaborations across school districts or other educational organizations. These experts offered general frameworks for understanding collaboration, conditions that jump-start or sustain collaboration, and specific strategies they have used. In parallel, PACE conducted a literature scan, both within and outside of education literature, to identify principles of network design and specific practices that help initiate or sustain collaboration. The scan included approximately 30 articles from peer-reviewed journals and professional and trade publications, and books. PACE analyzed the interviews and literature for principles, common themes, and examples that could apply to learning networks within and across schools, districts, and other educational organizations.

Lessons Learned

The following lessons combine what we learned in our literature scan with themes and specific examples shared by interviewed experts. These lessons are relevant for networks comprising anything from grade-level teams to multidistrict networks, and apply equally to networks working together in person or virtually.

Lesson 1. Participants Must Understand the Benefits of Collaboration to Overcome the "Costs" Inherent in Working Together

Collaboration doesn't simply happen—it takes energy and resources for participants to convene and work together. In explaining how to foster collaboration among organizations, one expert said: "[W]hen I think about just fostering collaboration, to what end? Why? … collaboration is costly." Another expert was just as blunt:

> Why work in a network in the first place? … It's a pain. … so you should have a theory about why it's better to do something as a network than not because you're going to invest a lot of time, resources, and so forth.

Improvement networks can be powerful problem-solving engines. By focusing on a common aim or goal, having a shared theory about how to reach that goal, and leveraging differing backgrounds and perspectives to generate solutions that work in different contexts, people working in networks can improve educational outcomes.[12] As one example, the National Writing Project (NWP) brings teachers together in its network to share successful strategies, deepen understanding of research, and test new strategies for teaching writing—and then support the spread of those ideas across schools and districts.[13] The NWP network's approach has been shown to have a significant impact on both teacher and student outcomes. In one randomized controlled

trial of secondary English language arts teachers in 44 school districts, teachers in districts working with the NWP showed significant differences in how they taught key writing skills; their students outperformed students in the control districts on four aspects of high-quality writing.[14]

Yet barriers to collaboration abound: differing priorities or beliefs; scant resources; and lack of communication between—or autonomy of—team members of organizations, to name a few, can inhibit effective work.[15] To persevere, network members must have a clear vision of why collaboration is worthwhile.

This vision may develop either before any action takes place or after experiencing the fruits of initial collaboration. One interviewee said that in networks, leaders most successfully coalesce around "a problem that's a burning question ... that they have tried their best to address and ... [haven't been] able to." In other circumstances, early "proof points" encourage continued investment. One expert recommended starting with a few participants who can produce positive results before scaling. Another interviewee pointed out how "early wins" helped one network see that "some of the things they were doing were having a positive impact, ... [which fed] the motivation to continue." Progress can spur excitement and deepen commitment. Either way, network leaders can better convene and maintain a collaborative network by clarifying and illustrating the benefits of collective problem-solving.

For individual network members, sustaining involvement in networks demands that participants feel their personal involvement is worth it. One interviewee found that in one network he worked with, participating teachers were energized "knowing that [something] was a problem that was shared ... and that eventually what they learned and what they figured out could be used for the benefit of the larger [region]." Tapping into the desire to have influence beyond their typical sphere can help individuals commit to the network and find fulfillment in working together.[16]

One expert said that, counterintuitively, asking members to contribute to the collaborative group more rather than less can be an important force in keeping them involved:

A lot of [networks] ... try to make it easier and less responsible for the [participants] .... But I also believe the thing that keeps people coming back is believing that their own being there makes a difference, ... that they've been asked to help create the solution or make it better, and that what they have contributed when they've been asked has been taken up and [has] mattered to people.

Showing how they can "contribute to the national conversation and ... to the greater community" is key to keeping members' hearts and minds engaged in a difficult process of working in a collaborative way, whatever their level of leadership. Specific protocols (structured guidelines for conversations, sometimes with roles or prompts) designed for meetings (e.g., protocols that encourage members to participate actively in discussions by rotating roles for facilitator, scribe,

etc.; or specific prompts for giving positive feedback) can reinforce people's sense that they are contributing beyond their typical sphere of influence and instantiate the sense that each collaborative member matters in the process and outcomes of the learning network.

Lesson 2. Collaboration Requires a Deliberately Nurtured Culture of Trust and Vulnerability

Working together on a common problem of practice often requires that participants be open about successes and failures in addressing that problem. However, revealing weaknesses or challenges takes vulnerability and trust that do not simply appear during group work sessions. Instead, that trust must be deliberately cultivated. Humility and openness to new ideas and feedback can break through the initial tendency to skate on the surface of a discussion about changes in practice.[17] One expert suggested that physically inviting leaders into one another's organizations allows them to see others' work and culture up close, which can spark the "humility" and "courage" to "acknowledg[e] that you can learn actually from others." This can open leaders to go "beyond just the rhetoric" to reach real learning.

Collaborative meeting structures can also support relationships that underpin collaboration. One expert described how she uses small "get to know you" moments (like icebreaker activities) to purposefully cultivate relationships, "because you have important work to do, and you need to know and trust each other, … [introductions must] actually be building to 'now you're going to do work together.'" This doesn't mean that every conversation must be focused on problems of practice. Indeed, some networks encourage participants to interact informally over lunch or dinner to let people get to know one another personally, outside of a work context.[18] The critical idea is that every interaction can be structured to build trust and connection, and that trust propels a group's willingness to discuss real ideas, data, successes, and failures.

Leaders, including group facilitators, should emphasize norms and other processes that continue to build trusting relationships as groups learn to work together openly. Good group work processes can help break through the temptation for network participants to talk theoretically about improvement without digging into their actual data or questions, a condition one expert described as erecting a "Teflon shield" around their weaknesses. That expert suggested that facilitators slowly build working relationships by having group members initially give feedback only on the strengths of someone's work (or even use work examples from someone outside the group so participants can practice giving feedback in a nonthreatening context) and then gradually move to giving praise and helpful critique as members feel more willing to give and accept both.

Consistent and effective norms and protocols, as well as meaningful informal interactions, help teachers and other school leaders develop enough trust and vulnerability to get past the "Teflon" so that they can say, as one expert put it: "Let's get to the heart of my problem." Increasing a sense of openness can in turn allow members of a networked learning community to dig deeply into real challenges and actually make progress on overcoming them together.

Lesson 3. True Collaborative Work is Different From "Show and Tell"

Trust is essential for doing work in a collaborative way that differs from merely getting together to discuss a common challenge or display individual efforts towards a goal. One interviewee said it pithily: "I think the key [to] collaboration is being able to put work on the table." This means that to make joint progress on complex problems, network participants need to be able to bring artifacts from their ongoing work, however messy or unfinished they may be, and often literally "put it on the table" for collective exploration and authentic question asking—instead of bringing a finished work product or evidence of a neat outcome.

A second expert contrasts this kind of work with many supposedly collaborative meetings that appear "closer to 'show and tell' kinds of endeavors where people are largely doing their own thing" and not engaging in true "joint work." A third expert agreed:

> [Networks can be] prone to districts coming together to tell each other what they did, but not really to problem solv[e] together. It's more about reporting and saying: " … Each of us is very unique and we all … have our own conclusions and [our] own strategies and we're all happy." … I think part of the work [must] be about being very rigorous about how you're coming down to examine your root causes, so that it doesn't become just an exercise of preference.

That people and organizations need to come to a consensus about the problem and the evidence does not contradict the idea that networks are powerful because they can test solutions in different contexts. Rather, it points to the importance of collective sensemaking in the context of common goals, frameworks for viewing the problem, and tools to approach testing solutions.[19] These common tools, such as structured testing cycles, enable deeper conversations that allow productive conversations about individuals' work.

There are indicators for when groups reach "deep" levels of collaboration. For example, meeting agendas reflect the belief that the heart of the meeting is collaborative work time (vs. listening to a single presenter, for example). During meeting time, a group might revise and build on each other's ideas during a discussion. Participants might examine evidence and come to a consensus about what actions or system characteristics are producing certain results. Over time, a narrative builds; as another interviewee explained:

> When the deep work is happening, people are able to tell stories … like this: It starts out with, "We thought the problem was X. It turns out the problem was Y." … "X number of people were focused, were impacted … and we have some theories about things that might make a difference. We haven't figured it out yet, but we will."

Because network members need to share and discuss real data to find a "causal line" between efforts and outcomes, it is important to establish norms of transparency, documentation, and collaborative work time. For example, a team might establish an expectation that members upload data to a common database, which can help jump-start authentic discussions couched in real work.

Conclusion

Educators have always had to tackle complex problems that have no clear-cut answers, and do so with changing conditions and information. Because collaboration is difficult, members need to understand why collaboration is critical for arriving at otherwise unreachable solutions. This level of work requires a culture of trust, humility, and courage, which takes careful cultivation. Once at work, participants need to go beyond "show and tell" to accomplish real collaborative work that involves sharing data, revising ideas, and analyzing successes and failures.

While we collected these data prior to COVID-19 and the lessons will still be relevant when it wanes, their importance is heightened by the challenges created by the pandemic. Collaborative networks can take this moment to consider how to make the work they do to support educators more effective in a time when many teachers and leaders feel they have no bandwidth to spare for nonessential work. If done well, collaborative networks have the potential to accelerate and magnify the learning and work that so many individuals or organizations would otherwise be doing alone. As learning networks across the state develop, they can enhance the collaboration that district leaders, school administrators, and teachers do together to make schools—however they may look at the moment—better places for all students.

Endnotes

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3   Kimner et al., 2020; Myung & Kimner, 2020.

4   A version of this brief was originally produced to support the CORE-PACE research partnership in response to a request from the CORE Districts (a network hub hosting improvement communities that serve the Fresno, Garden Grove, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento City, San Francisco, and Santa Ana Unified School Districts; coredistricts.org) to understand better how to support collaboration between districts in CORE improvement communities. Learn more about the CORE-PACE partnership at edpolicyinca.org/initiatives/core-pace-research-partnership. This current brief has been reframed for a more general audience.

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Author Biographies

Angela Gong is a research analyst with Policy Analysis for California Education at Stanford University, focusing on PACE's continuous improvement research-practice partnerships. She was previously a middle school science teacher in Oklahoma City and a test developer for NAEP in Washington, DC. She is interested in how school- and district-level leaders gather, interpret, and use data for improvement. She holds degrees from Stanford's joint master's program in Education and Public Policy (MA/MPP).

H. Alix Gallagher is Director of Strategic Partnerships at Policy Analysis for California Education. In that role, she uses various research methodologies in partnership with practitioners to support ongoing organizational improvement while building knowledge for the field. Before joining PACE, she was an associate director at the Center for Education Policy at SRI International, where she led large-scale randomized controlled trials and policy studies, and was fortunate to be part of two successful long-term research-practice partnerships. Her expertise is in improving instructional quality and student outcomes.

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Related Publications

Gallagher, H. A., Gong, A., Hough, H. J., Kennedy, K., Allbright, T. N., & Daramola, E. J. (2019, January). *__Engaging district, school, and teacher leaders in improvement.__* Policy Analysis for California Education.

Gallagher, H. A., & Cottingham, B. W. (2019, October). *__Learning and practicing continuous improvement: Lessons from the CORE Districts.__* Policy Analysis for California Education.

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