

# **Characteristics of Effective Educator Networks**

**Developed for the  
Governor's Council on  
Educator Advancement**

# THE PROCESS

A project team from Foundations for a Better Oregon was contracted to share the characteristics of successful networks for the Governor's Council (Council). These characteristics will help inform the Council on the structures and processes needed to implement Senate Bill 182 (SB 182). To this end, the project team formally partnered with three diverse Oregon educator networks. These networks served as prototypes to help us gain insights on how a new state entity could design a variety of educator networks, provide ongoing support, and disseminate funds. Networks will ideally be established to locally and collaboratively solve systemic issues along the educator advancement continuum—leveraging capacity, expertise, and resources among participants.

Based on critical attributes highlighted in SB 182 and the Council's 2016 recommendations, we selected three prototype networks to evaluate. Recognizing three networks would not allow us to fully explore the desired scope, we also reached out to leaders across the state working in other successful collaboratives, such as regional achievement collaboratives and early learning hubs. A brief description of the three prototype networks selected can be found on the following page.

In addition to selecting three prototype networks, we developed key questions in collaboration with project staff, Council Members, network leaders, and network participants. These questions explore the alignment of educator network structures and critical attributes to SB 182 goals and the Council's recommendations. The questions clustered around the following key themes and helped identify structures and processes for:

## Goals and outcomes

- Leveraging financial and human capital resources
- Readiness levels
- Support, learning, and implementation
- Teacher voice and shared leadership
- Measurement and accountability

Understanding that improvement work is inherently adaptive and flexible, we approached these themes more as a proactive guide for engagement with the prototypes rather than as an outline for a research paper.

---

# THREE PROTOTYPE NETWORKS

---

## Salem-Keizer Mentoring Network

The Salem-Keizer Mentoring Network is a district-led network that has been sponsoring mentoring for five years. It includes 13 surrounding districts and one educational service district (ESD). Salem-Keizer developed a funding structure that leverages state and local resources and shared human capital across different-sized districts with varying school climates and contexts.

## Oregon Education Association's (OEA) Quality Assessment Practice Network

OEA's Quality Assessment Practice Networked Improvement Community (QAP-NIC) is an education association-led network with a statewide focus. It is a well-established network and covers many of the attributes listed in either SB 182 or the Governor's Council's recommendations. QAP-NIC went through a one-year design phase and has been functioning as a network for seven months. Its goal is to elevate improvements to systems contributing to quality assessment practices at all levels (classroom, district, and state), and to learn the how, what, and why behind implementing rigorous classroom-based assessment practices in various context to inform state assessment policies and practices.

## Northwest Regional Education Service District's (NWRESA) Deeper Learning and Equity Network

NWRESA's Deeper Learning and Equity Network is an ESD-led network that aims to bring together school or district teams across its region to learn and implement culturally sustaining and deeper learning practices rooted in equity. Its goal is to support participating teams in identifying and disrupting systems barriers that prevent a student's access to a culturally sustaining and relevant learning experience. NWRESA is in the design phase and plans to launch the network in fall 2018. Partnering with NWRESA allowed us to learn from it and also advise it on key structural decisions and functions it can put into practice as it operationalize its network.

---

# DEFINITION OF TERMS

---

## Collective Impact

The commitment of a group of stakeholders from different organizations, or sectors, to a common process for solving a specific problem, using a structured form of design and implementation.

## Empathy Interviews

A semi-structured approach to collecting data to understand the context, uncover hidden needs, and guide improvement efforts from the vantage point of those that a system aims to serve, or the system user. Interviews begin with a pre-established series of questions and the freedom to ask follow-up questions that go more deeply when possible. Empathy interviews collect data through stories to help better understand system barriers.

## Equity Driven

When solutions are built locally, through a process of deeply understanding system variance and the experience of those being served, equity can be operationalized. Equity-driven implementation focuses on adaptive implementation with integrity, not just fidelity.

## Fail Forward

Test a change idea or solution on a small scale with the full understanding it may be modified or adapted to fit various local contexts.

## Locally Developed

Stakeholders, or system users that may include educators, students, parents, district leaders and/or community members, come together to discuss the way challenges appear in their specific district, school, or organization. They seek to uncover the root causes of a problem, from the perspective of those that the system is aiming to serve, before identifying a solution. Once they understand the problem, they collaboratively create solutions.

## Sponsor Organization

Educator networks will be organized around a sponsor organization that can provide or facilitate content, process, fiscal, and infrastructure support to the participating school districts. They will partner with Educator Advancement Council (EAC) staff to meet the requirements of the educator network.

## System Variation

Most school reform initiatives accept a wide variability in performance; the variation itself is what educator networks should be seeking to understand. Why is something working well for students in some classrooms, schools, or districts but not working well in others? For example, is there geographic or demographic variability that needs to be addressed?

## Tested and Refined

Once locally developed solutions are designed through an inclusive process, teams begin small scale implementation. They run rapid, measured implementation cycles to collect data on the results prior to further testing out across the entire district. This allows solutions to be adapted to meet the local context of the district and school communities.

## User and User Centered

Educators begin identifying systems that should be rebuilt to fit the needs of the end users— teachers, students, families, and communities— and bring these users into the process of designing solutions to systemic variation.

# CHARACTERISTICS

## ONE

Educator networks, independent of content focus, have a shared and supported process of design and implementation to ensure they are not selecting or scaling program solutions without knowledge of strong improvement practices. The networks' practices are inclusive—involving districts' users or those the system aims to serve—and through shared leadership and equity of voice, implement a continuous improvement process that allows those involved to:

- Elevate and understand the problem deeply to identify the variation that needs correcting
- Identify system change ideas
- Test the changes in various contexts
- Measure, monitor, learn, and adjust implementation of changes as they scale

### Improvement Cycle



## TWO

Educator network are supported through the following three phases:

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
<b>Understanding Local Context</b>	<b>Prioritizing Goals</b>	<b>Continuous Improvement</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collect/review local data to understand need</li> <li>• Identify user groups and design team</li> <li>• Establish relationships between sponsor organization, network teams, and EAC</li> <li>• Collect empathy data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritize and select local goals</li> <li>• Identify outcomes and success metrics</li> <li>• Examine alignment across district and network strategic plans</li> <li>• Develop stakeholder feedback loops to inform the process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish plan, do, study, act (PDSA) cycles with network teams</li> <li>• Continue coaching across educator network</li> <li>• Connect educator networks across common needs and understandings</li> <li>• Implement stakeholder feedback loops</li> </ul>

## THREE

Educator networks have multiple ways of organizing through a sponsoring organization. Based on the prototypes, the following are three examples of how future networks could function.

### 1. Existing content expertise

A sponsoring organization with deep expertise in an area can recruit districts statewide to participate in a network focused on its expertise. EAC resources support the sponsoring organization by building improvement and implementation process capacity.

Oregon Education Association's Quality Assessment Networked Improvement Community (QAP-NIC) is an example of an existing content expertise network. It is organized around the design and implementation of quality classroom assessment practices with OEA staff as the lead. As the sponsoring organization, OEA leveraged an outside grant from National Education Association (NEA) and worked in partnership with other state organizations to support learning sessions and coaching around assessment practices, user-centered design, and measured implementation.

Network participants included school districts, individual schools, and higher education partners. In order to be considered for this network, groups commit to the timeline, participation in network learning and sharing, and on- and off-site implementation. The QAP-NIC is a multi-year partnership seeded by OEA through its general fund, a grant from NEA, and shared capacity of partner organizations. The expectation is that the participating groups will absorb the funding burden over the next three years.

### 2. Readiness for change

An organization applies to be an educator network regional sponsor. With support from EAC resources, the organization engages districts in its region to collect user data to determine content focus. If the focus requires professional learning the sponsor organization cannot provide, the EAC collaborates with the educator network to identify an outside provider, taking into account the following possible criteria:

- Evidence of equity as foundational.
- Evidence of high quality professional learning standards in the design and implementation of services aligned with Oregon Learning Forward standards.
- Willingness to participate in a transparent evaluation process as a tool for sharing and vetting future contracts with other districts or networks.

In a readiness for change network, the EAC directs a process including analyzing local data and collecting empathy data from users of surrounding districts to determine the local educator network focus. Once a focus is determined, the participants continue to receive support from the sponsoring organization or EAC to understand deeply why this is a district focus. If learning is required to support the network, the sponsoring organization uses network dollars and leverages district resources to contract with a trainer who demonstrates evidence of high quality professional learning and implementation standards. The sponsor organization collaborates with the participating districts to build a funding model for the network that uses state dollars to seed learning and implementation, and helps districts identify the necessary shifts to their systems to scale and sustain the change.

### 3. The EAC acts as a resource broker

In this role, it connects districts with a local educator network working on a shared problem of practice or area of focus; recruits a sponsor organization to lead a network that has demonstrated expertise in a needed focus area; or connects educator networks with overlapping content or process needs.

As a resource broker, the EAC supports the creation of partnerships to leverage shared expertise, resources, capacity, and lessons learned. The EAC supports the identification of local needs by districts and adaptive implementation for solutions from other networks. Sponsor organizations can also use the EAC's statewide reach to connect to the work underway with other networks to share lessons learned and again leverage shared expertise and capacity.

## FOUR

Readiness for the work—from both the sponsoring organization and participants—is crucial although it can be supported and can look differently across the state. Characteristics of readiness may include:

- Strong participation commitment from the district, union, and board leadership. The stability and sustainability of the work is stronger when leadership is engaged in a meaningful way.
- Willingness to leverage district resources (including, but not limited to financial and human capital), partnerships, capacity, and expertise across the network to complete design and implementation.
- Evidence of (or desire for) improvement mindsets such as:
  - \* Equity as foundational
  - \* Inclusive design process
  - \* Shared leadership and decision making
  - \* Starting small and learning fast
  - \* Failing forward and learning
  - \* Long-term commitment to process of system improvement

## FIVE

Educator networks set their goals based on a deep understanding of how the current system is operating from the viewpoint of those it aims to serve. Networks do not organize around a solution, a program, or an initiative, but around improving specific systems of support for educators along the educator advancement continuum. By focusing on system improvement, networks will sustain changes and expand the investment because often the existing system is already fully resourced.

### Educator Advancement Continuum



## SIX

Educator networks, when applying a rigorous process of user-centered design, need flexibility within existing statute formulas or mandates. The example below is based on feedback gathered during the prototyping stage:

The number of hours mandated to support mentees is an example of where such flexibility would be advantageous. Currently, each mentee receives the same amount of mentoring support and resources regardless of need. A user-centered approach would guarantee each mentee the same core support and resources, and then allow districts and mentors the flexibility to provide differentiated support based on need. Support plans are targeted to the needs of each mentee and the needs within each district. This flexibility allows each district the ability to spread its mandated mentoring resources equitably across all new teachers, and develop additional plans for those who need more targeted interventions outside the mentoring program.

A superintendent from a small district in the Salem-Keizer Mentoring Network succinctly illustrates the need for this recommendation:

“Greater flexibility, or ranges, for the time mentors need to support a mentee is essential. Some of our new teachers have the art of teaching more developed than the science of teaching and vice versa. They do not require the same amount or type of attention to develop. If our mentors had more flexibility to create support plans based on need and best practices we could do more. Currently as it stands mentors are required to serve everyone equally and some new teachers need more time than others.”

## SEVEN

Educator networks can design differentiated objectives and measures of success based on their local context. The objectives reflect the needs of each organization participating in the network and are embedded in a theory of change showing the pathway toward sustainable and systemic change. Selected success metrics measure impact and implementation reflective of these local theories of change and are focused on things like culture, mindset, process, and systems shifts, as well as student and educator impact measures. Networks collect and track multiple measures to monitor the return on investment and adapt implementation as needed. Participating organizations need support with measurement design and data collection in order to pull out common measures across networks and to demonstrate ongoing support for the investment.

## EIGHT

Educator networks are developed with a commitment to and a need for collective impact. Sponsoring organizations, districts, and other partners (such as philanthropy, higher education institutions, business and industry) are encouraged to contribute or participate in an educator networks via matched funds, content expertise, capacity support, or as learners. Likewise, students, parents, and community members will be engaged in the network by helping define barriers to success, share their experiences with the system, and elevate relevant and meaningful solutions from their vantage points.

Coined as a collective impact model, an educational service district (ESD) in Central Oregon develops local service plans leveraging state, philanthropic, or other community dollars, and requires districts to match funds. This shared commitment helps seed district initiatives and allows the ESD to slowly step aside as the districts scale the changes. Through this model, districts are able to partner with each other, share needed capacity building, and build sustainable change.



## **NINE**

State dollars are used to seed the formation of an educator network, the improvement process, content learning, and small scale implementation cycles. Through participation in an educator network, participants are supported as they increase their awareness and understanding of systems and process improvement to scale implementation across their organizations.

## **TEN**

Sponsor organizations seek out expertise and capacity to support the rigorously adaptive design and implementation process needed in educator networks. They provide coaches for the participating organization who can facilitate the improvement process and the needed content. These expert coaches meet network participants where they are in readiness and experience level, and adapt the process to this starting point.

## **ELEVEN**

In order to ensure sustainability, the work of participating organizations needs to be embedded within systems and be understood at multiple levels within the organization. Besides understanding that those closest to the work need to be at the table to design and implement, successful networks know that teacher leaders need to be the ones who carry the practices forward. Teacher leaders will help adapt the changes and imbed them into their organization's district's culture in case of leadership changes as highlighted in the example below.

A teacher leader who participated in an early grant provided by the current Network Funds for Quality Teaching reports that a few years after grant funds left, there are barely traces of the investment remaining. Although outcomes were promising throughout the grant, there were not enough decision makers in the know and thus the district went back to the old ways of doing business. The teacher leader believes that if the district had prioritized deep involvement and understanding by more teachers and building leaders, they would be a different organization district for students today.

## **TWELVE**

It is important to meet existing networks or organizations where they are. As well as leverage and honor the many successful collaborative projects already set up throughout Oregon, and explore the possibility of partnerships that will support educator advancement efforts through continuous improvement processes.

### **Acknowledgements**

The following organizations participated in the creation of the characteristics outlined in this report.

- NW Regional Education Service District
- High Desert Education Service District
- Salem-Keizer School District
- Oregon Education Association
- Chalkboard Project
- Cascade School District
- Oregon Department of Education
- Chief Education Office

---