



Professional learning for a virtual world

NETWORK HELPS DISTRICTS NAVIGATE CHALLENGING TIMES

BY MICHELLE BOWMAN

In March 2020, emergency school closings as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic initiated a sudden widespread use of virtual learning and brought new challenges that affected teaching and learning across multiple contexts.

The complex change caused school district leaders to make plans to reinvent and reimagine schools (Transcend, 2020) and created a need for teacher professional learning on effective techniques for teaching

remotely (Lieberman, 2020).

An effective professional learning system is essential to improving teaching and learning in this and all contexts and removing inequities in students' access to opportunities that lead to their success as productive adults and citizens (Hirsh & Brown, 2018). Facilitating these complex changes and supporting leaders to build equitable systems requires transformation at every level of the education system (Learning Forward, n.d.).

As education leaders around the world faced the same problem, Learning Forward responded with a deliberately designed community of practice to facilitate community learning and shared problem-solving (Wenger et al., 2002). The community of practice, called Design Professional Learning for a Virtual World, enables members to share expertise, resources, and knowledge, pursue a common purpose, and learn from one another.

I studied the community of

6 CORE ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE	
Characteristic	Detail
Shared problem of practice	The community is in alignment on the clearly articulated problem of practice and impact goals shared by all affiliated systems. This shared focus and expertise amplify efforts.
Active learning anchored in a continuous improvement process	The community has process and support in place to engage in a cycle of inquiry to implement improvements, capture key lessons learned, and share best practices.
Collective ownership	Partners and hub organizations have clear expectations of one another and personal ownership of the collaboration process.
An appropriate mix of partners	The community includes the right mix of committed systems and engaged personnel to participate actively.
A sufficient commitment to support the implementation of new ideas	System partners have sufficient dedicated capacity to participate meaningfully and actively; the hub has sufficient capability to facilitate.
An effective structure of governance and decision-making	Systems engage in standard processes that enable continuous improvement and effective decision-making.

Source: King, 2016.

practice model and found that when school district leaders engaged and collaborated in the community of practice specifically focused on designing and implementing a comprehensive professional learning system, their professional learning knowledge, skills, and leadership behaviors changed significantly (Bowman, 2021). They learned more, collaborated more effectively, and became more proficient in leading professional learning.

ABOUT THE NETWORK

The Design Professional Learning for a Virtual World network built on Learning Forward’s history of and expertise in leveraging networks and communities to support improvement in school systems and education agencies.

In 2015, Learning Forward established a model for interdistrict collaboration in a community of practice, building on Wenger’s (1998) community of practice framework as well as the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011). Through that work, we identified six core elements for a successful community of practice in education (see table above; King, 2016), which served as the foundation for the Design Professional Learning for a Virtual World network.

The network included district and state teams, addressing their current challenges related to the design, implementation, and measurement of professional learning in virtual and digital models. A team of Learning Forward staff and consultants facilitated

PARTICIPANTS

IN THE DESIGN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR A VIRTUAL WORLD NETWORK

The Design Professional Learning for a Virtual World network had two cohorts.

- Teams in the first cohort (September 2020 to June 2021) were from seven school districts and one state education agency: Alaska Department of Education, Broward County Public Schools (Florida), Fort Sam Houston (Texas), Fort Wayne Community Schools (Indiana), Frederick County Public Schools (Virginia), Miami-Dade County Public Schools (Florida), Tulsa Public Schools (Oklahoma), and Stafford County Public Schools (Virginia).
- The second cohort began in January 2021 and concludes in December 2021. The school districts include Cobb County Schools (Georgia), Loudon County Schools (Tennessee), Northshore School District (Washington), and Parkway Schools (Missouri). Each cohort also included a team of Learning Forward Affiliate leaders from the participating states.

members’ learning through virtual convenings, customized coaching, resources, and organizational management tools.

The work occurred in three stages: supporting ongoing success in virtual and hybrid learning environments,

responding to maximize learning during the school year, and reinventing professional learning to acknowledge and embrace new learning models.

Participating teams created contextualized, comprehensive professional learning plans focused on outcomes, with solutions aligned to district/province and state strategic plans that work across departments.

The network’s shared problem of practice centered on leveraging the current environment to develop an equitable and sustainable professional learning system that maximizes the potential and impact of digitally mediated learning. After confirming the shared problem of practice, each team described the problem in its local context, then used common templates and protocols to set a vision for success. The vision established the desired future state to ensure equity through innovative professional learning strategies. (See table at right.)

Next, each team assessed the status of the professional learning system against the intended future state. The analysis used four focus areas: coherence and relevance, ensuring equity, measuring impact, and virtual environment and resources (see figure on p. 45). Then the team set goals to include in the professional learning plan.

The goals aligned to district and state strategic plans and intended to increase capacity to create policies and practices for effective professional learning with sustainable solutions that work across departments. For each goal, the teams identified milestones and metrics to measure use, change, implementation, and impact. In the last step, teams drafted short-term activity plans.

Throughout the process, the community of practice design engaged the team members as collaborators and critical friends. Teams shared lessons learned from the emergency shift to virtual and digitally mediated educational models and used them to inform the improvement of the

EXAMPLES OF CONTEXTUALIZED PROBLEM OF PRACTICE AND VISION	
Shared problem of practice How do we leverage the current environment to develop an equitable and sustainable system of professional learning that maximizes the potential and impact of digitally mediated learning?	
Problem of practice in the local context	Vision for success
FORT WAYNE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS How do adult learners leverage districtwide professional learning to enable and sustain instructional practices, both academic and social and emotional, that provide equitable learning experiences for students learning in remote and in-person modalities by 2020-21?	Empowering educators to change practices and improve equitable outcomes for adults and students.
TULSA PUBLIC SCHOOLS How do we ensure professional learning in Tulsa Public Schools is designed and [implemented] to develop anti-racist educators, intentionally notice, name, and interrupt issues and practices that perpetuate inequity, and support the use of liberatory, culturally sustaining practices?	Educators will authentically engage in aligned learning opportunities within safe learning spaces that hold them to high standards as they move forward in their growth and develop the practices and mindsets that result in safe, care-centered, liberatory, and joyful learning environments necessary to enable the high levels of student engagement and learning required to achieve educational justice.
BROWARD COUNTY SCHOOLS How do we plan, design, and [implement] an equitable and sustainable system of professional learning that is cohesive and includes differentiated and individualized learning that addresses just-in-time needs and maximizes the impact of digital, blended, and face-to-face learning and leverages the current environment?	Provide a cohesive and deliberate plan of action to ensure that high-quality professional learning is intentional, monitored, supported, valued, equitable and sustained to ensure positive impact on teaching, learning, job performance, and career growth and development for all.
ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION How do we collaboratively develop an equitable and sustainable system of culturally responsive professional learning that maximizes the potential and impact of digital learning, leverages the current environment, and scales evidence-based practices aligned to identified measurable goals in the Alaska Education Challenge, promoting increased coherence across systems?	A responsive, coherent, and effective statewide system of professional learning based on evidence-based practices for all educators to ensure an excellent education for every student every day.

professional learning system.

The collaboration between like-minded state and district leaders facilitated understanding how short-term lessons from the pandemic can inform long-term professional learning plans and support building a contextualized, comprehensive professional learning plan.

District and agency teams consolidated their work through the network into a comprehensive professional learning plan that can serve as the basis for future professional learning. The plans outlined teams' sustainable solutions to immediate challenges and a professional learning infrastructure that transcends the 2020-21 pandemic. Examples of the comprehensive professional learning plans are available on the Learning Forward website learningforward.org/networks/virtual-design/.

STUDY DESIGN

I studied school district leader engagement and collaboration in the community of practice to examine whether leaders' individual learning and professional learning efficacy changed. The study focused on three research questions:

1. What is the relationship between the three dimensions of a community of practice identified by Wenger (1998) and individual school district leaders' learning? (See box below for information on the dimensions.)
2. Do school district leaders' perceptions of those dimensions change after community of

practice participation?

3. Does school district leaders' professional learning efficacy (knowledge, skills, and leadership behaviors) change after community of practice participation?

The quantitative study used a survey design that focused on members who were school district leaders. Of the 42 members, 35 were eligible for the study. They completed a 20-item survey in December 2020, near the beginning of the learning cycle, and in May 2021, at the end of the cycle.

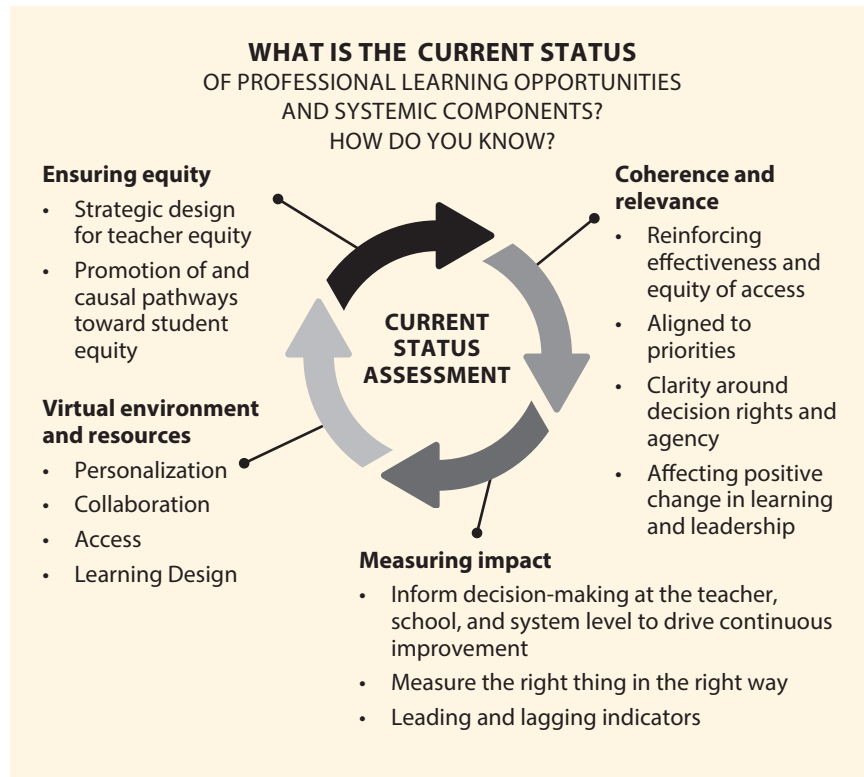
The survey assessed participants' level of agreement with statements

about the community of practice dimensions (shared repertoire, joint enterprise, and mutual engagement) and their agreement with statements about their individual learning. The survey also assessed participants' community of practice experience (Resources for Learning, 2016, 2017) and professional learning efficacy as defined by knowledge, skill, and leadership behaviors about professional learning (Hirsh & Brown, 2018; Killion, 2013a, 2013b; Learning Forward, 2011, 2013).

STUDY FINDINGS

Analysis revealed that community of practice organization and structure positively impacted school district leaders' participation, engagement, learning and professional learning efficacy. Here are specific findings.

There was a significant correlation between shared repertoire, joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and school district leaders' learning. School district leaders who believed the network embodied those three



3 DIMENSIONS OF A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Wenger (1998) identified three characteristics of a community of practice:

1. *Shared repertoire* shows up as routines, words, actions, and concepts that become part of the community of practice.
2. *Joint enterprise* is the common identity and interconnectedness among members.
3. *Mutual engagement* is the collaborative action members use to solve problems.

dimensions of a community of practice learned more. For example, the cooperative interactions and knowledge sharing spurred collective action. School district leaders partnered for a common purpose and learned innovative ideas and practices to design and implement a professional learning system.

The community of practice provided a beneficial structure and environment for interdistrict collaboration. The community of practice design enabled school district leaders to come together to solve a problem they cared about (King, 2016; Wenger, 1998). Over time, network members became more aware of one another's competence. They engaged in challenging conversations and participated in facilitated interactions such as critical friends protocols, offering and receiving feedback on work such as goals and milestones.

Leaders' learning and professional learning efficacy changed after community of practice participation. School district leaders increased their knowledge about their roles and responsibilities to ensure effective, efficient, and equitable professional learning for all educators. They also reported that they developed their own and others' capacity to lead, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning (Learning Forward, 2011).

Overall, the community of practice provided a valuable environment for school district leaders to learn and increase their capability to recognize and implement an effective professional

learning system as a key strategy for supporting and sustaining equitable improvements to increase results for all students — even at a time of enormous challenges and rapidly changing learning conditions.

The interdistrict collaboration in the community of practice provided leaders with like-minded thought partners facing similar challenges who, together, built their capacity to address immediate challenges with sustainable solutions that can impact teaching and learning for the long term.

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