



Education First's Approach to Networks & Collaboration

In our experience, communities of practice work best when they:

- **Include the right people:** those with decision authority and who are mindful of both policy/content and politics; when they include a cross-section of interests within the district/state and across multiple states.
- **Take advantage of the power of the group:** offer substantial opportunities to learn from peers.
- **Use provocative data** and information on promising practices to test participant assumptions.
- **Provide informed facilitation:** Participants need preparation prior to meetings or coaching opportunities; we provide facilitators with the finesse to know when and how to push and we bring our own expertise and that of other education leaders to the table to diagnose and strengthen participants' action plans.
- **Enable ownership** by participants of cross-site learning; networks are effective when district and state leaders recognize that learning requires a real time and participation commitment.
- **Create a sustained learning and sharing experience** over time that is not one-shot.
- **Balance the interests** of the participants, sponsors, evaluators and technical assistance providers—with a clear bias toward maximizing ownership and participation by participants.

As a result, Education First approaches the design of communities of practice and results-driven meetings so that the community:

Is co-created with *both* clients – the participants and the network funder/sponsor.

- It's not enough to agree on the *what*: the problems we're trying to solve, the community of practice's purpose, the specific topics to address. We must all agree on the *how*: what strategies, tactics, and technical assistance activities are most important for the network to undertake, by when, by whom and with what roles and responsibilities for the participants, the funder/sponsor and the technical assistance providers.

Maximizes both participants' ownership and sponsor/funder interests.

- Technical assistance tools and activities are most useful when they are co-created and co-owned by the community of practice members themselves; when members are given sufficient (but not too much) time with peers outside of their offices to explore and address problems of practice; when the time commitment to members is articulated up front; and when members are engaged at just the right level so as not to over-burden them.
- We encourage ongoing engagement in strategy by the participants and the funder/sponsor in such key areas as the selection of network topics and focus areas; research, dissemination and knowledge management strategies; maximizing participants' time; and balancing internal knowledge sharing within the network with bringing in state/national experts.

Selects appropriate tactics to meet the goals.

- A smart community of practice engages participants remotely and in-person, with materials, tools and resources available 24-7 and by request. The goal is to create constant learning

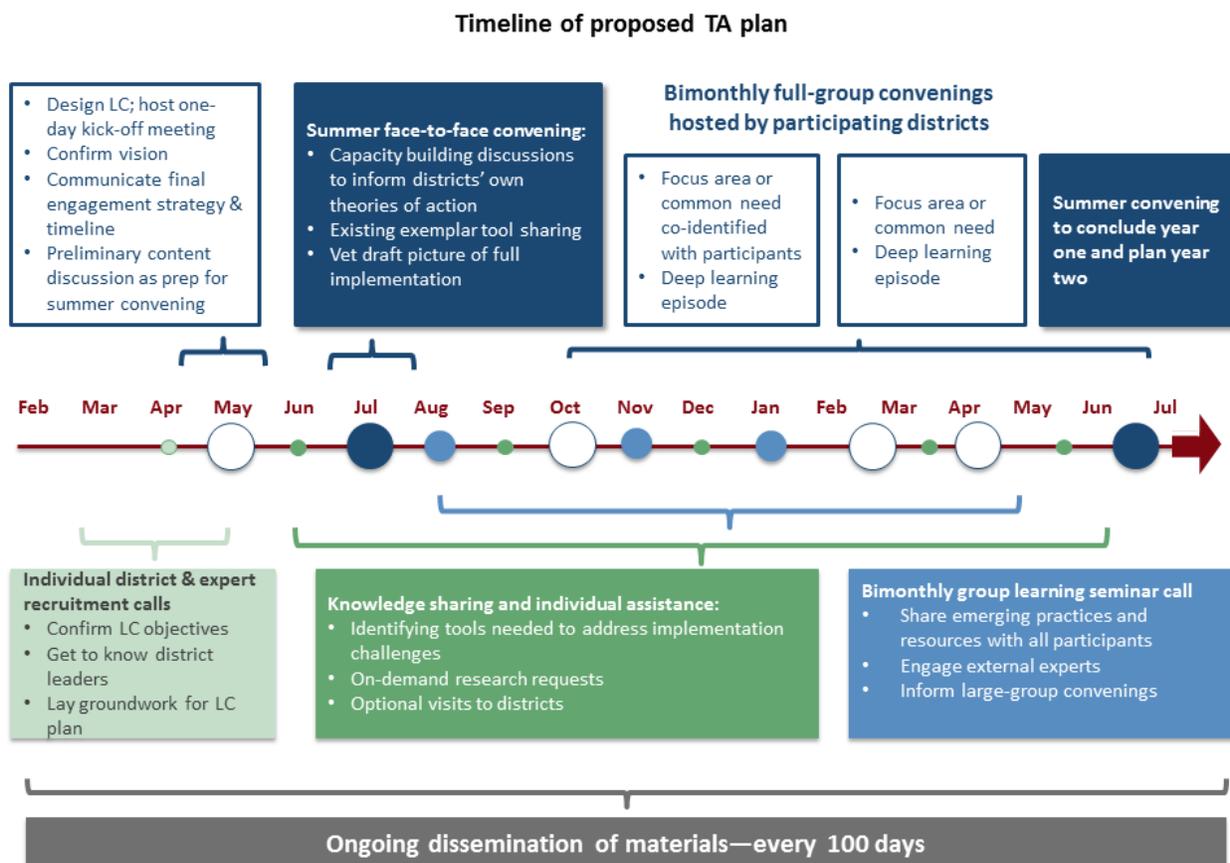
episodes for participants to improve their knowledge, planning and delivery.

- Convenings are expensive in terms of cost, participant time and planners’ time; this tactic should be used when it’s necessary to advance the work. Our perspective is that convenings are important focal points around which to gather participants for the kind of learning that best takes place face to face; that convenings must occur within the context of a larger strategy of ongoing technical assistance rather than as “one-offs”; and that convening agendas should emphasize team planning time and cross-site consultancies, while de-emphasizing general/plenary sessions or “sit and get” conversations. While we are not meeting planners, we have serious expertise in designing and executing participant-centered convenings as part of a larger technical assistance strategy.

Doesn’t just provide a forum for participants to meet, but helps improve participant delivery.

- Education First’s involvement is maximized when the community of practice is designed to bring informed facilitation to participants. We aren’t simply neutral agenda- or time-keepers; we help guide the meeting so that participants walk away with an improved action plan, more relationships and enhanced knowledge.
- A network will often uncover common challenges that require individual coaching, advice or outside expertise; a well-planned network should include flexible resources to engage such experts sparingly but when necessary.

A sample plan for a community of practice for school districts in a single state might look like this:



**Partial list of Education First-Designed or -Managed
Communities of Practice, Learning Networks and Multi-Organization Collaboratives
Updated September 2015**

School, District and State Networks (2006-present):

- Supported *Achieve's American Diploma Project Network*: Design network, produce research and technical assistance and coach state governors, K12 and postsecondary chiefs to design and enact college- and career-ready standards, assessments, data and accountability systems (35 states, 2006-2013)
- Designed technical assistance for Complete College America's *Alliance of States* and facilitated multiple Completion Academies (35 states, 2012-2014)
- Designed and manage the NoVo Foundation's *Coordinating Districts Initiative: Integrating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) with Academics and Teacher Effectiveness*: Coach districts on integration of academics and non-academic skills; identify and broker common technical assistance needs; support NoVo's grantmaking (12 urban school districts, 2014-present)
- Facilitate and manage *Opportunity Culture School and District Networks*: Charlotte, Nashville, Syracuse (2 cohorts of 4 schools each to design and implement their models) and Texas (3 schools in Dallas, 4 in Big Spring and 2 regional Education Service Centers) (2013-present)
- Designed and managed *Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Learning Network*: Help evidence-based SEL providers work at scale in large school districts (12 SEL program providers, 2012-2013)
- Facilitate *Equitable Access Support Network* (50 states, 2014-present): Coach states on USED teacher equity plans and lead four communities of practice—Policy and Programs; Data Use and Analysis; Stakeholder Engagement; and Rural Access Issues and Support

Race to the Top Technical Assistance (2011-2015):

- Coach districts in the District Reform Support Network (21 districts, 2013-present)
- Designed and delivered Reform Support Network (RSN) *Teacher & Leader Effectiveness Community of Practice* with individual technical assistance to participating states; facilitated group knowledge sharing on critical design and implementation topics; led big working groups:
 - Student Learning Objectives Working Group
 - Transition to New Standards Working Group
 - Improving Observations Quality Working Group
 - Building Principal Capacity Working Group
 - Data Analytics for Quality Evaluation Rollout Working Group
- Designed and delivered *SEA-LEA Collaboration Community of Practice and Sustainability Working Group*
- Designed and delivered *Communications and Stakeholder Engagement Community of Practice*

Funder Collaboratives and Grantee Networks:

- Designed *Assessment for Learning Project* (districts and CMOs TBD, 2015-2016):
- Designed and manage *California Common Core Funders Collaborative* (2014-present)
- Designed and manage *Common Core Funders Working Group* (2013-present)
- Designed and manage *High Quality Assessment Project* (20 states, 2013-present)
- Designed and manage *Core to College Network* (12 states, 2012-2015)
- Designed convenings for Gates Foundation teacher voice grantees and ECET2 (2010-2012)
- Design and manage Stone Foundation grantee convening (2009-present)
- Design and manage Hewlett Foundation anchor network and grantee convenings (2014-present)