Education First's Approach to Networks & Collaboration

November 2017

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experience | quality | results

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:

Timeline of proposed TA plan
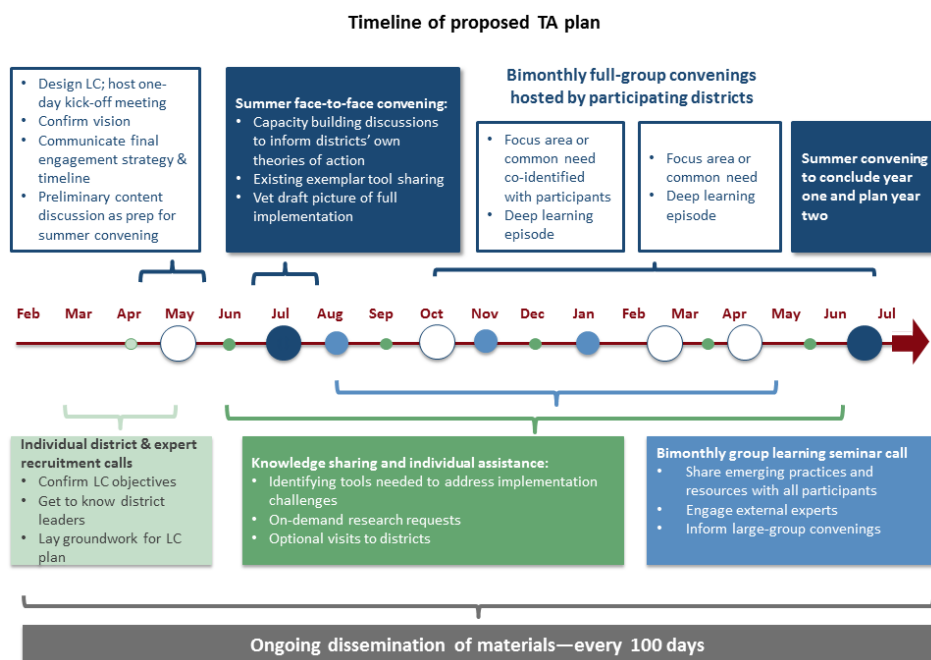
Partial list of Education First-Designed or -Managed Communities of Practice, Learning Networks and Multi-Organization Collaboratives

Updated November 2017

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

- Created and manage the *SEL Innovation Awards Network* for teacher innovation grantees and district/CMO innovation grantees (2016-present)

- Design and manage the NoVo Foundation's *Coordinating Districts Initiative*: Coach districts on social emotional learning strategy and programming; identify and broker common technical assistance needs; support NoVo's grantmaking (12 urban school districts, 2014-present)

- Designed and managed *Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Learning Network*: Helped evidence-based SEL providers work at scale in large school districts (12 SEL program providers, 2012-2013)

- Facilitated USED *Equitable Access Support Network* (50 states, 2014-2016): Coach 50 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*

- Facilitate and manage *Opportunity Culture School and District Networks:* Charlotte, Nashville, Syracuse (2 cohorts of 4 schools each to design and implement their models), Big Spring and Spring Branch, TX, and Chicago (2013-present)

- Supported Achieve's *American Diploma Project Network* (35 states, 2006-2013)

- Designed technical assistance for Complete College America's *Alliance of States* and facilitated multiple Completion Academies (35+ states, 2012-present)

Federally-funded district/CMO and state-based technical assistance (2011-2017):

- Coached districts/CMOs in the District Reform Support Network (21 districts, 2013-2017)

- Supported 50 states in the *Equitable Access Support Network* (2015-2017): Coached states on equity plans and led four communities of practice: Policy and Programs; Data Use and Analysis; Stakeholder Engagement; and Rural Access Issues and Support

- Designed and delivered Reform Support Network (RSN) *Teacher & Leader Effectiveness Community of Practice* (2011-2015) with individual technical assistance to participating states; facilitated group knowledge sharing on critical design and implementation topics; led several working groups, including the Student Learning Objectives Working Group; Transition to New Standards Working Group, Improving Observations Quality Working Group, Building Principal Capacity Working Group, and Data Analytics for Quality Evaluation Rollout Working Group

- Designed and delivered *Sustainability Working Group; SEA-LEA Collaboration Community of Practice*; and *Communications and Stakeholder Engagement Community of Practice* (2013-2015)

Funder Collaboratives, Grantee Networks and Grantee Convenings:

- Manage the Funder Collaborative for Innovative Measurement (2017-present)
- Manage Teacher Preparation Transformation Centers Community of Practice (2016-present)
- Manage the California Common Core Funders Collaborative (2014-present)
- Managed Personalized Learning Research Community of Practice (2016-2017)
- Facilitated the Common Core Funders Working Group (2013-2016)
- Planned and led the *High Quality Assessment Project* (20 states, 2013-2017)
- Managed the Hewlett Foundation's anchor network and grantee convenings (2014-2016)
- Managed the *Core to College Network* (12 states, 2012-2015)
- Designed several convenings for Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation teacher voice grantees, ECET2 and Teaching is Learning collaborative (2010-2012)
- Designed and managed the Stone Foundation's grantee convening (2009-2015)