

TEACHER NETWORKS COMPANION PIECE

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Network building vitally impacts career development, but in few professions does it impact daily practice more than in teaching. Teacher networks, known as professional learning communities, communities of practice, peer learning circles, virtual professional communities, as well as other names, play a unique and powerful role in education. In addition to providing opportunities for teachers to impact school change on local, state and national levels, networking links teachers directly to resources that improve classroom environments and support the generation of instructional tools, which directly impacts student learning.

The diverse and vast knowledge base of networks includes school-wide, grade-level, and content area strategies. It also includes innumerable approaches to learning, such as project-based learning, connected learning, and maker-centered learning. Leveraging this knowledge base through a network brings novice teachers into the fold, supports the professional growth of mid-career educators, and reinvigorates seasoned veterans. Teacher networks present opportunities for teachers to serve as peer mentors, rediscover intellectual passions, present and discover new models of learning, and reframe their professional identities as teacher-researchers, teacher-leaders, and teacher-mentors.

For these reasons, the Philadelphia Education Fund (Ed Fund) has incubated and advocated for teacher networks through program and policy efforts for more than two decades. The Ed Fund's investment in teacher networks is a critical piece to impacting Philadelphia's teacher network landscape through District-wide policy initiatives, teacher network-based professional development, teacher convenings, and teacher pipelines.

History of Teacher Networks at the Ed Fund

In 1995, two teacher networks--Philadelphia Alliance for Teaching Humanities in the Schools (PATHS) and the Philadelphia Renaissance in Science and Mathematics (PRISM) merged with the Philadelphia Schools Collaborative to create the Ed Fund. One of the Ed Fund's initial pieces of work was an impact study of "teacher-centered networks" on the adaptation of District reform efforts, including the role of teacher-leaders in leadership roles around professional development and teacher service on curriculum committees. Research conducted by the Ed Fund [1] revealed that the teachers leading District reform efforts were already involved in teacher networks throughout the region, confirming that the "networked teacher" is more likely to be engaged, become a leader, and drive positive change.

The galvanizing of teacher networks continued to feature heavily in the Ed Fund's programmatic efforts throughout the 1990s. Viewed as a trusted partner by the District teachers, the union, and various city-wide entities, the Ed Fund emerged as a broker between teacher networks and the resources necessary to sustain them. For example, the Ed Fund:

- hosted The Power of Teacher Networks: A Cross-Network Conference (2000), bringing together seven area networks.
- successfully incubated networks, (including the National Writing Project and Teachers Lead Philly), by serving as thought partners as well as providing operational resources and support during the early stages of development.
- served in the role of chief facilitator to the SDP's professional development goals. This was the case for IBM's Reinventing Education grant (1998-2011) to network teachers effectively implementing technology in the classroom, as well as for the Reduced Class Size Initiative and Balanced Literacy Summer Institute (1999-2000).
- acted as the lead implementation partner to Johns Hopkins's Talent Development High Schools (1999-2005) and facilitated professional development networks among 9th grade teachers at each high school. Targeting the specific challenges of teachers addressing the needs of over-aged middle school students, the Ed Fund networked teachers through the Middle Grades Acceleration Program (2003-2007).

More recently, the Ed Fund has engaged in a reflective process to assess and redefine the Ed Fund's relationship with teacher networks to inform viable strategies for deepening our work with networks. Based on this work, the Ed Fund is formalizing its work with networks to build 1) external teacher networks, 2) in-school networks, and 3) the city-wide networking landscape.

Today, through current programming, the Ed Fund directly manages four teacher networks:

- Philadelphia Teacher Residency (PTR): PTR residents and mentor teachers each form networks.
- Early Warning System (EWS): EWS networks teachers within schools as well as principals between schools to build school-wide systems geared towards getting students on track to graduation as early as 6th grade.
- Math and Science Teacher Forum: the Math and Science Coalition has built a network among area Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) teachers
- Philadelphia Postsecondary Success Program (PPSP): PPSP Fellows exist as a network across four schools to align high school practices and curriculum with college persistence.

This year, the Ed Fund served as project manager for a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation-supported series of teacher-led convenings. The convenings engaged over 300 teachers to focus on teacher voice, student engagement and Common Core. Convening participants reported the high value of many of the sessions, and in particular the Teacher Leadership and Innovative Thinking with Peers sessions. Participants also cited the opportunity to network with other educators, and the opportunity to learn strategies to improve student engagement, as reasons for attending. Following the convenings, teachers reported learnings that they felt would improve their practice in each focus area: 96% for teacher voice, 93% for student engagement and 93% for Common Core.

Current Ed Fund Research on Teacher Networks

In 2013, the Ed Fund interviewed over 180 teachers and teacher networks at 15 schools to ascertain the role teacher networks play in developing teacher expertise, how teachers value networks, and how networks impact professional persistence.

The researched showed formal, in-school networks serve one or more of the following functions:

- School-level systems and practices (e.g., Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports, technology, practice) 'Grade-level activities (e.g., lesson planning)
- Classroom-level activities (e.g., Response to Instruction and Intervention)
- Community-level happenings (e.g., social events or gatherings)
- Informal and out-of-school networks act as supplementary (in schools lacking formal in-school networks) or complementary (in schools with strong formal in-school networks).
- In schools lacking formal networks, teachers must pursue informal and out-of-school networks to supplement needs. In schools with strong formal structures, informal and out-of-school networks can enhance school and classroom goals and enable additional professional growth and innovation.
- Teachers value networks that build knowledge/expertise, strengthen relationships, and practice resource and sharing.

Ed Fund Future Commitment

Based on research and close partnership with teachers, the Ed Fund recognizes that teacher collaboration through networks not only enhances student learning through the sharing of resources and expertise, but also enhances the profession of teaching by improving school and district climates and providing leadership opportunities. Teacher networks serve as a professionally empowering tool for teacher self-efficacy and school capacity building. As such, the Ed Fund's future commitment to supporting teacher networks is as follows:

First, through **quarterly convenings of existing teacher networks, teacher leaders, and stakeholders** who view these groups as their constituents and partners, the Ed Fund will create a space for collaboration to occur. This collaboration serves multiple purposes. Networks often share members, perspectives, and goals and with regular face-to-face meetings between these groups exceptional ideas spread and cross-fertilize. Networks can then avoid duplicative efforts instead combining energy and resources to realize common ends and share strategies for success. Mature networks can serve as models to emerging ones, and emerging networks can provide innovative viewpoints and frameworks to established networks. These convenings also function as "think-tanks" to workshop ideas before promoting them to broader audiences and informing policy change. The Ed Fund also supports the development of new out-of-school networks and the inclusion of these networks in these quarterly convenings.

Second, the Ed Fund will develop a **hub for teacher networks** in Philadelphia – an online community in which educators connect in a variety of ways. The vision for the hub includes not just space for individual teachers to post resources and share ideas but also a display of leadership opportunities, professionalism and innovation. Networking will be a central function of the hub so that users can experience the relationships between and among teachers and networks.

Third, the Ed Fund will **identify, develop and expand teacher networks in schools** by creating, co-convening and facilitating teacher network planning groups at schools, identifying the existing network landscape and need (network mapping), co-developing action plans for supporting and incubating new networks and delivering professional development around a variety of topics related to creating teacher networks in schools such as asset mapping, network incubation, network sustainability and systems.

The Ed Fund is dedicated to continued investment in teacher networks, empowering teachers to position Philadelphia to be a uniquely networked city for teachers, so that our schools can deliver the education our students deserve. This is part of the Ed Fund’s commitment to developing great teachers and building paths to college and career success. To have a great teacher in every classroom and a path to college and career for every student, we need to flip the script on the preparation and support of teachers in Philadelphia.

Endnotes

[1] Elizabeth Useem, Judy Buchanan, Emily Meyers, Joanne Maule-Schmidt, “Urban Teacher Curriculum Networks and Systemic Change,” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, 1995; Elizabeth Useem, James Culbertson, Judy Buchanan, “The Contribution of Teacher Networks to Philadelphia’s School Reform,” Report for the Philadelphia Education Fund, 1997.

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