

New partnership between local networks and central leadership

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The power of effective networks lies not only in their potential to improve teaching and learning in schools, but more importantly, in their power to become forces of positive change of entire systems. The full realization of this potential requires:

1. Developing a mindset of system leadership among participants of collaborative groups – that is, taking responsibility for the improvement of other groups as well as your own, and serving as “boundary spanners” between groups;
2. Creating cross-sectional venues of ongoing collegial inquiry, discussion, and decision making to strengthen enabling conditions for effective collaboration and to identify and remove constraints; and
3. Becoming better partners laterally and vertically with system leaders.

We use the concept “systemness” to characterize the movement we are describing in this paper. Systemness means that people are deliberately doing their own part as they contribute to and benefit from the agenda of the larger system. When a school moves from individualism to collaboration, individual teachers stop thinking only of “my” children in “my” classroom, and become committed to all the children in the school. When individual school principals in a network become almost as committed to the success of other schools in the group as to their own, they are exhibiting system thinking. When networks become better partners with other networks and with system leaders they are also contributing to the improvement of the whole system. All of these cases represent an increase in systemness, or the state where a majority of people come to see themselves as system players.

Pushing the argument further, effective networks can develop the power to turn educational systems into self-evolving, learning organizations. Enabling, supporting, and unleashing the power of effective networks requires a redefinition of the link between central offices and local networks (see, e.g. the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement, in Hargreaves et al., 2009). The developments we are describing reflect three fundamental shifts in the evolution of school systems.

From supply driven to demand driven

In a collaboration-oriented system, central leadership continues to play a crucial role on things such as setting an inspiring vision for the system, defining overall priorities, monitoring progress, building capacity, delivering resources and enabling conditions for effective collaboration, and providing an adaptable framework and broad guidelines for collaboration. Networks, especially those where effective collaboration is already underway, should take reasonable control over the agendas that are to be the focus of their collaboration – e.g. their specific problems of practice, internal norms and processes, etc. A “gradual release of responsibility” approach whereby support and intervention from external facilitators diminishes as internal capacity increases is adequate for the purposes of enhancing effective collaboration in networks across entire systems. Local networks take on the responsibility of demonstrating positive impact of their work on professional capital and student learning, and receive in exchange greater freedom over their improvement agendas.

From compliance oriented to learning oriented

In a new system that enables and is reinforced through effective collaboration in networks, learning is placed at the centre of the education endeavour, and evidence of improved learning takes precedence over any claims of non-compliance. In a learning-oriented system, lead learning, or creating the conditions for all to learn while learning alongside them about what works and what does not (see Fullan, 2014) is the new role of leaders across the educational system, regardless of their formal role within a hierarchy.

From bureaucracy to movement

Another fundamental shift that is required in the relationship between central offices and local networks in order to realize the full potential of networks is the move from one of command, control, and compliance to one of movement building aimed at radically transforming the institutional culture and structure of schooling and school systems into one that fosters deep learning and continuous improvement all the way from students to schools to the central office.

The next phase of system improvement

Networks represent a serious quality proposition for the future of education, and thus require deliberate cultivation and support. There are many more ways for networks to go wrong than to positively improve outcomes and education systems. Effective action in networks does not just happen by bringing people together and encouraging them to get along and collaborate. Setting into motion and sustaining an effective network is hard work. As captured in the essential features discussed here, it requires a relentless focus, ambitious student outcomes linked to increasingly effective pedagogies, high levels of trust and internal accountability, a practice of continuous and transparent learning, deliberate leadership with a radical redefinition of authority, constant interaction within and outside the network, new partnerships between students and the adults in their lives, and the necessary resources to consolidate and sustain the work.

Leadership from the middle with its deliberate learning stance, its ongoing lateral connections, and its partnered links upward and downward may be the most powerful approach of all times in achieving greater system coherence and sustainable improvement and innovation. It requires a process with essential components that are tested against success, and strengthened through learning from successes and failures.

Networks should be initially assessed on the basis of what is likely to make for productive work. Premature judgment on impact should be avoided although commitment to measurable impact is part and parcel of the modus operandi of effective networks. The bottom line is that networks need a purposeful design with clear features and a compelling practical theory of action. They should produce evidence and learning from their efforts – for their own sake, and for the sake of the system.

As we enter a potentially transformative period of change for education, where innovation combined with focus and links to impact will be essential, we predict that effective networks will become increasingly critical to system success. The eight essential features of effective networks and the three fundamental shifts in the relationship between central leadership and networks presented here represent our best effort to offer clarity and direction for a next stage in the evolution of the education sector.