

The Contributions of Teacher Networks To Philadelphia's School Reform

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Teachers in Philadelphia have been involved in a rich set of teacher networks since the early and mid-1980s. As a result, the District has substantial capacity within its ranks to support school reform efforts. This study provides evidence of the power of these networks to undergird and sustain district-wide educational change. Having accomplished much of the hard work of exploring issues of teaching and learning together over a number of years, network members could move quickly to help in the implementation of the systemic reform effort launched by Superintendent David W. Hornbeck in 1994.

Teacher and school improvement networks are widely regarded by researchers and policymakers as effective vehicles of professional development and educational change. Philadelphia's extensive set of teacher networks has developed with the support of local universities, museums, and the Philadelphia Education Fund. External funding organizations--private foundations and the federal government--have financed these efforts with the School District of Philadelphia often providing supplemental support. Philadelphia's networks include the Philadelphia Writing Project, Project 2061, the K-12 Math/Science Leadership Congress, the Interactive Mathematics Program (IMP), and Project SEED. These and others promote long-term voluntary professional development experiences that emphasize collaborative inquiry and reflection on content and pedagogy, teacher empowerment, and leadership development.

The authors' 1995 study of four networks found that teacher-centered curriculum networks provided powerful learning experiences for their participants. Large proportions of participants credited the projects with contributing to their professional growth and to changes in their teaching. In this 1997 follow-up study of 14 networks, we investigated the extent to which these entities and their individual members had been utilized in the District's systemic reform effort, *Children Achieving*, undertaken by Superintendent David W. Hornbeck and the District's Board. The primary research

questions were as follows:

- To what degree and in what ways have the pre-existing externally-funded networks been incorporated into the new networks and initiatives created by the District under *Children Achieving*?
- What variations exist among the networks in the ways they have been “put into play” under *Children Achieving*? What factors explain these differences?
- How well have the networks been able to sustain themselves? What issues threaten their viability?

FINDINGS

The networks have, in fact, taken on a range of important roles in *Children Achieving*. Three of the mathematics and science networks were officially integrated into the federally-funded Urban Systemic Initiative, the District’s math and science arm in teacher professional development. The other networks were not formally included in District planning and implementation of professional development but individuals from the networks played major leadership roles in reform efforts in Central Office, the Cluster offices, and the schools. At the level of the school and the 22 feeder clusters of schools, networks were used as organizations to assist with work in standards and professional development.

Network Influence Through Individual Members

Approximately 12-14 percent of Philadelphia’s teachers have been affiliated with the networks studied for this paper. Their proportion in the leadership efforts of *Children Achieving* in professional development and curriculum, however, has been much higher. During the 1995-96 and 1996-97 school years, for example, they made up:

- 81 percent of the Facilitators of the teams that wrote new academic standards for the District;
- 43 percent of the teachers and administrators who served on the standards writing and review teams;
- 45 percent of the Teaching and Learning Network Coordinators (responsible for professional development) operating in each of the 22 feeder clusters;
- 50 percent of Teaching and Learning Network Facilitators;
- 23 percent of the Cluster Equity Coordinators;
- 87 percent of the organizers and planners of the 1997 summer professional development content institutes in mathematics, science, and English/Language Arts.

In math and science curriculum and professional development efforts, involvement in

teacher networks, particularly Project 2061, has been the route to district-wide leadership positions. All of the key leaders of the District's Urban Systemic Initiative (USI) in math, science, and technology come from teacher networks. Seven leaders of other subject areas in the Curriculum Office and in School Library Support, three of them from the Philadelphia Writing Project, have been network members. Network participants have also been active in leadership positions in their schools. For example, more than 90 percent of the Math Resource Leaders now hold the position of USI Teacher Leader.

Network Influence as Organizations

The work of three networks--Science Resource Leaders, Math Resource Leaders, and Project 2061--was integrated into the District's Urban Systemic Initiative. Project 2061, originally involved in writing national benchmarks in science, has played an important role in leading the analysis of curriculum resources for the District and for selected schools and clusters. The Interactive Mathematics Program (IMP) is one of two high school mathematics curricula being promoted by USI and is now adopted in 17 of the District's high schools. The K-12 Math/Science Leadership Congress has been running summer institutes focused on issues of academic standards, pedagogy, leadership development, and technology.

The other networks have not been extensively involved in work with the Central Office. Instead, their services have been tapped by individual schools or feeder clusters of schools. This is especially the case with the Philadelphia Writing Project which has been called on to run seminars and courses in selected clusters in addition to its regular complement of two summer institutes for teachers across the District.

The work of the Coalition of Essential Schools, particularly the Critical Friends Groups for principals, is expanding. Project SEED will be training all of the Equity Coordinators in the Fall of 1997 in the area of equity in race, class, and gender issues in curricular materials. The Library Power model, now operational in 30 elementary and middle schools, has been expanded to include 13 additional schools. All of these efforts are aligned with the goals of *Children Achieving*.

Connections to the District

Networks vary in their direct links to the District: some operate as self-governing independently-funded entities on the periphery of the District; others are engaged in a genuine partnership with the District; and still others have been closely integrated into the system's structures and operations. Formerly active networks in History and Social Studies have atrophied, with the exception of the Geographic Alliance and a new Japan Project.

The Future of Networks

While Philadelphia's teacher networks have been an important component of the District's professional development infrastructure, they face a number of challenges. They must continue to raise money from external organizations. They must recruit new members and cultivate new leadership. The networks must walk the fine line of being inside/outside organizations: close enough to the District to be of real use in the reform effort yet sufficiently independent to be efficient, teacher-centered, and self-governing. Intermediary organizations that serve as funders, program developers, partners, and fiscal agents need to be mindful of the need to support the long-term viability of these critical vehicles of professional growth and school improvement.