

Problem of Practice Network: A Case Study

Since the fall of 2020, Partners has been facilitating a thirteen-school Problem of Practice (POP) Network in the School District of Philadelphia that is focused on middle grades math. The purpose of the network, which will operate for two years, is to increase the capacity of educators to provide rigorous, standards-based math instruction that promotes educational equity.

As with most of our POP Networks, this initiative has three major components: 1) monthly convenings of the math teachers and instructional coaches from the thirteen schools, 2) quarterly convenings of school leaders, and 3) follow-up support at each schoolsite.

Monthly Convenings

During the monthly convenings, which generally last three hours, participants focus mainly on math concepts and instruction. For example, the teachers and coaches analyze content standards, plan lessons, share instructional materials, debrief on the effectiveness of teaching strategies introduced in a prior convening, and debate fine points such as the best way to teach students about [box-and-whisker plots](#).

In addition, network participants use convenings to analyze student performance on quarterly assessments (benchmark, diagnostic, etc.) and, as necessary, adjust their plans for either whole-class or small-group instruction in the upcoming quarter.

Participants generally find the convenings highly valuable, with one teacher describing them this way: “I always leave Partners sessions with new ideas or a new perspective in looking at data and planning for my class. The things that we share are meaningful, and I use many of the ideas in my classroom.”

Along with math content, the convenings feature a variety of educational equity topics. For example, network participants discuss ways to deliver culturally responsive instruction and foster students’ sense of belonging in their school. In addition, educators reflect on their identity and examine the role of race, class, culture, and power in their schools and public education generally. We have also helped participants think through ways to facilitate classroom discussions about social justice issues.

Holding these convenings signals to participants that middle grades math and the associated equity issues are important. The highly collaborative nature of the convenings helps build a sense of community in which educators support, learn from, and push each other. Our use of an online platform that is similar to Facebook fosters interaction between sessions and helps create a network that will last well beyond Partners’ facilitation.

The participating teachers, who are generally the only middle grades math teachers in their buildings, now have colleagues who can provide specific advice and share instructional materials to help meet immediate needs as well as the sustained support required to make long-term shifts in their practice. “The opportunity to collaborate with other math teachers that have the same struggles and triumphs is incredible,” says one teacher. “I really appreciate the time we are given to plan how to implement the tactics we discuss and learn about through our readings.”

Convenings of school leaders

Principals are always invited to the monthly sessions to keep abreast of the professional learning that their staff are engaged in and to participate themselves. In addition, we hold sessions exclusively for school leaders on a roughly quarterly basis. Creating a professional learning community for principals increases the coherence of the network and helps ensure that the changes we are helping bring about among teachers and coaches will take root. It also gives us time with principals to hear about progress at their sites.

Follow-up Support

Each of the thirteen participating schools receives an average of one half-day per week of support to reinforce and apply the learning from the convenings. As the network was getting off the ground, our team worked with school leaders to identify ways that we could be most impactful with our follow-up support.

For example, a Partners team member runs one school's professional learning community. In another case, a Partners person leads teachers through monthly continuous-improvement cycles and keeps the principal apprised of teachers' growth. Yet another example of the follow-up support we provide is co-designing a school's instructional leadership team meetings and follow-on activities with teachers.

Moving Beyond Math

In both the convenings and follow-up support, Partners works with educators to develop a continuous-improvement approach to their work. The approach we promote is called the Results-Oriented Cycle of Inquiry (ROCI). It involves five steps: set goals, plan, act, assess, and reflect & adjust. This approach, which is not just a procedure but a mindset as well, can be applied to a wide range of challenges that educators face. In particular, the instructional coaches and teacher leaders who participate in the POP Network carry ROCI over into their work beyond middle grades math instruction, extending ROCI into all aspects of schools' operation.

Similarly, the equity work that we do with educators in the POP Network can be applied well beyond middle grades math instruction. In other words, math teachers are spreading their equitable practices across their schools.

Building educators' capacity to implement both continuous-improvement methods and a focus on equity brings about stronger instruction for all students in the districts with which we partner.