





Harnessing the Power of Collective Inquiry

Superintendents collaborate in a network to share candidly their leadership challenges and tap into colleagues' practical insights

BY CHRISTINA E. MURDOCH, STEVEN M. LADD AND JOHN P. GLASER

A group of 15 superintendents is seated around a large conference table on the University of California Davis campus discussing how they might end the practice in their respective schools of referring struggling students to special education classes. They are engaged in a unique professional development model that uses a problem of practice and theory of action case study protocol to address current leadership challenges in their school districts.

The particular case study's problem of practice, or POP, on this day is dealing with a frequently shared issue of equity: How can school districts increase the instructional capacity of teachers to effectively address the needs of low-performing students so they aren't so routinely referred for placements in special education classes?

The theory of action, or TOA, presented in the case study is this: "If the district provides research evidence to teachers on the impact of multitiered supports for students and provides professional development in effective pedagogy, while principals examine student performance data from teachers to support in-classroom instruction, then more students will be successfully served in general education classrooms and referral rates to special education will be reduced."

For most superintendents, this is an onerous and complex problem. Rather than frustration, there is a palpable feeling of engagement in the room. The candid discussion has focus and a complete sense of safety and trust. As the participants, who lead suburban, urban and rural school districts across

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northern California, probe optimal answers, realistic resolutions and potential pitfalls of the case, the discussion is both supportive and deep. The superintendent who has been presenting the case, based on actual experiences in his 1,800-student district, then reflects on the insights gleaned from the discussion. He agrees to share progress in future meetings with the group of 18 colleagues.

Being Vulnerable

What makes this particular learning community so unusual is that the superintendents acknowledge and respect the value of “being able to be vulnerable to bring a problem forward in a safe environment,” as one participant put it. As such, the constructive critiques are having a significant positive effect on their leadership.

Superintendents sometimes admit to the sense of isolation that exists in their work lives. In most settings when superintendents get together, such as at state and national conferences, the attention is directed to the myriad organizational challenges that face district CEOs — budgeting, facility and finance issues; board and governance matters; local, state and national politics; human resources, collective bargaining; health and safety.

Unlike classroom teachers, counselors and principals, most superintendents rarely work on their own problems of practice with other superintendents. While superintendents have competent senior-level administrators in their cabinets, the discussions are not the same.

This collaborative model of professional development has resulted in network participants forging a strong professional and personal commitment to each other and to the network that supports the real instructional leadership work each is doing in their districts.

The Power of a Network

The California Superintendents Collaborative Network is an action-oriented, inquiry-based, collegial organization grounded in research and designed to support superintendents’ actual work. For the past six years, 15 to 20 district superintendents participate annually in the series of five daylong sessions. (The program at the UC Davis Center for Applied Policy in Education moved to a virtual platform at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and is employing a hybrid model in 2021-2022 based on a participant poll.)

When participants prepare and present case studies that identify POPs and TOAs, they use a systems lens described in the works of researchers Peter Senge and Michael Fullan.

Case studies brought to the collaborative yield well-informed insights. As one superintendent stated: “Understanding how other superintendents conceptualize a problem of practice, how they engage their board, staff and communities, and the rich conversation accompanying each problem, provides a unique opportunity for reflective practice and growth.”

Networking superintendents want to explore (a) successful practices other school district leaders



Steven Ladd and Christina Murdoch lead the California Superintendents Collaborative Network, a collegial organization supporting up to 20 superintendents.

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are using to open up access for high-quality education for all students; (b) how board of education policies and community groups might be helpful in leveraging systemwide school district changes; (c) how school district and school culture can be changed across systems; and (d) how superintendents use systems thinking to create coherence.

Participants see the power of the network tied to four major areas of emphasis:

- ▶ Placing teaching and learning at the center of the district's work;
- ▶ Building system coherence, organizational capacity, and professional and collaborative learning cultures;
- ▶ Connecting and supporting colleagues around instructional practice; and
- ▶ Focusing on leadership and the district as the unit of change.

Other key features include a research university/practitioner partnership; facilitation by experienced professionals; and a link to both current research and the real work of districts. Superintendents talk through their case studies with facilitators in advance of the sessions to discuss any refinements to ensure the presenter gets what they hope during the actual case presentation.

"It's not a matter of whether I've had a similar problem or if I will have a similar problem in my district, it's a matter of when," stated one superintendent. "These sessions help me to be better prepared to lead."

Building on Cases

With every case, network participants hear a progress report from the presenter. The superintendent who brought forward the case on multi-tiered supports and special education returned to the group 18 months later with a next iteration of how to stem the referrals to special education. The status report illustrated how his understanding of the problem had deepened, and his recognition that the reflective practice of the network changed his approach.

Over time, the school district had moved away from "increasing teacher instructional capacity exclusively through staff development," which he described as "a grindingly slow process" that was "narrow-minded" and "placed teachers in a passive role." Instead, a more robust theory of action was being applied that shifted focus from one



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action to multiple and more systemic actions.

His new theory of action described using teacher expertise to build teacher capacity; implementing a co-teaching pilot program to build partnerships between general education and special education teachers with progress reporting to colleagues and peers; and re-educating teachers about least restrictive environment law and the potential harm of overusing 1-to-1 aides in classrooms.

Following the presentation, another participant who was a few years into establishing co-teaching in his district, spontaneously invited the superintendent, along with his staff, to join in on an upcoming co-teaching training in his district. The subsequent district visit informed and energized both district teams.

While the network, then in year 3, envisioned support beyond the case studies, this marked the first such collaboration.

Interestingly, some of the superintendents have exported the case study methodology to their district leadership teams, expanding reflective practices beyond the network to district systems at large.

A Reflective Setting

Although rare, collegial learning opportunities to improve instruction are as important for district superintendents as they are for teachers. But with superintendents' political and highly public personas, providing the setting for honest and confidential reflective practice requires a unique environment.

As one veteran member stated, "We come together to learn from each other and tackle the actual work at hand through research and evidential inquiry. The use of a theory of action model helps to instill a collaborative professionalism that assists in acquiring a deeper meaning. These conversations and times of reflection inspire each of us to transform teaching and learning into purposeful, meaningful experiences for our students and staff alike." ■

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