**Chain Reactions that Improve Instruction: How the IL CoP Creates Favorable Conditions**

An Initial Evaluation of Chamberlin Education Foundation’s Instructional Leadership

Community of Practice – Executive Summary

2021 SREE Summer Fellowship / Jason E. Saltmarsh

**Problem**: School leaders have a profound impact on student learning and play a critical role in school improvement (Grissom, Egalite & Lindsay, 2021; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2019). Yet, despite principals’ degree of influence and the range of skills and knowledge needed to be effective, school leaders often receive limited on-the-job support, particularly from their districts (Honig & Rainey, 2020). Under these conditions, the principal position, which is thoroughly social, may paradoxically produce a sense of isolation that can contribute to the 21% yearly turnover for leaders in high poverty urban schools (Levin, Bradley & Scott, 2019).

**Community of Practice:** In 2018, Chamberlin Education Foundation (CEF) created an instructional leadership community of practice, targeting those they perceived as highly motivated principals with instructional support and capacity building assistance in hopes of raising local students’ achievement. Subsequently, the cohort grew to include 12 schools, or one quarter of those in West Contra Costa Unified School District, and to incorporate teacher leaders and vice principals.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Intent**: Given the absence of state standardized test data in 2020 and 2021, Chamberlin Education Foundation sought a novel method to evaluate how the quality of teaching and learning in member schools was changing as a result of the IL CoP. Program managers at CEF and researchers agreed that the Summer Fellow would conduct interviews with school and teacher leaders to examine the impact of the IL CoP and analyze whether the program was aligned to scholars’ findings on effective school leadership.

**1st Finding – Program Approach:** The summer study leveraged data from a concise literature review on success school leaders’ practices, skills, and behaviors to produce two sets of findings about the impact that the IL CoP is having on school leaders’ capacities and student learning. Analysis of program records and contracts as well as informal interviews with foundation leaders revealed that there is extensive alignment between IL CoP activities and literature on effective school leadership. Key strengths of the program include their a) tendency to differentiate adapt programming and b) instructional focus particularly classroom observation and feedback, data use, standards-based curriculum alignment, building school climate. A few caveats to this finding were worth noting. The researcher had questions about how leaders were held accountable for implement changes based on their learning and how the program was tracking the participation, engagement, and quality of its CoP activities and those involved external partners, like coaches or PD providers.

**2nd Finding – Impact**: Systematic analysis of interviews with 21 school and teacher leaders yielded four dominant themes in the data. Participants reported that the IL CoP is effectively:

* Systematizing instructional aims - The IL CoP recast school leader priorities from management and operations to instructional growth. In doing so, the cohort initiated new systems, structures, and routines to keep leaders accountable for these matters. The backbone of this theme was leaders’ enhanced presence in classrooms as coaches or critical friends. Leadership coaches monitored changes and added external pressure that contributed to principals’ feedback conversations with teachers and strategic use of data to plan adult learning sessions.
* Nurturing autonomy - The IL CoP fostered a valuable sense of the school leader’s autonomy through listening, being responsive, and, as one principal stated, “giving us the kind of support we’re asking for.” Leaders expressed that the IL CoP respected their agency and professionalism. During cohort meetings, members drew on each other’s diverse experiences and used exemplars to design their own improvement plans. Members also partnered with outside experts, or legitimate peripheral participants, in organizations like TNTP, Education Partners, Standards Institute, and Teaching Lab.[[2]](#footnote-2)
* Reinforcing assets, removing barriers - The cohort offers a forum for exchanging resources that range from advice to protocols, professional development modules, and strategies for obtaining teacher buy-in. Membership in the IL CoP gives leaders access to financial benefits like grants for curriculum materials and stipends for their time in meetings. These assets and others build on district support, which some participants report is lacking, and equip leaders with resources and strategies that help them overcome resistance to organizational changes around instruction.
* Creating Connection - The program unites a special or elite set of leaders. Participants view peers as high performers or, as one principal stated, “the people that I really trust and can learn from.” While members aspire to be connected to the group, they also report that these leaders are on their level, having the “same struggles” as they do. Due in part to valuable social capital and the sense of belonging that the group provides, most leaders expressed that connection to peers was the foremost strength of the IL CoP.

**Recommendations for Programmatic Development**

1. To renegotiate evolving membership and purposes, engage in higher-level vision setting activities. Remind the cohort of their joint enterprise and align most activities to this shared purpose.
2. Plan meeting times solely for the core group of principals and other meeting times for the broader leadership team.
3. Build relationships with districts officials. “Managing up” should include sharing data on CoP schools’ growth, inviting officials to CoP activities, and sharing intentions to have CoP leaders promoted to district leadership roles.
4. Self-evaluate using World Class Schools rubric or another instrument. Alternatively, conduct formative evaluation site visits in pairs or small groups and debrief together.

**Directions for Future Research**

1. Solicit feedback from teachers and other personnel to gain corroborating, disconfirming, or new evidence on how IL CoP learning is disseminated to or shared with site teams and experienced by students. Consider using surveys or site visits and observations.
2. Compare similar schools inside and outside of the CoP along various outcomes using a difference-in-differences research design. Utilize data pertaining to teacher and principal retention, student attendance, and various student learning outcomes.
3. Identify and sequence all IL CoP activities and interventions involving insiders, partner organizations, and member gatherings.
4. Since case study incorporates multiple, diverse data sources, invite a comparative case study using metrics like parent surveys, student engagement surveys, disciplinary data, and changes in student interim exam scores, STAR reading and math results, and SBAC scores.

References

Grissom, J. A., Egalite, A. J. and Lindsay, C. (2021). “How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research.” New York: The Wallace Foundation.

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Levin, S., Bradley, K., & Scott, C. (2019). Principal turnover: Insights from current principals. *Learning Policy Institute July*.

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School leadership & management*, *40*(1), 5-22.

Wenger, E., Trayner, B., & De Laat, M. (2011). Promoting and assessing value creation in communities and networks: A conceptual framework.

1. The IL CoP facilitates a system of ongoing relationships and a collective commitment among members to advance their professional learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this case, seminars, group sessions, site-based coaching, and curriculum adoption training aimed to improve participants’ capacity to positively influence student learning. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This analysis was grounded by a conceptual framework that assesses value creation in communities. As such, I attempted to construct a cumulative picture of evidence from personal narratives about changes in practice, new knowledge, interactions, and performance enhancements (Wenger, Trayner, & De Laat, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)