



## **The Practice of Communities of Practice in School Districts: An Introduction**

A *community of practice* (CoP) is a group of practitioners dedicated to learning with and from one another in pursuit of promising instructional, organizational and leadership practices that support increased student achievement. Communities of practice can exist among peers within a school, across a district and across partnerships. Communities of practice are not the latest organizational fad, but recognition of how knowledge and learning get transferred, developed and evolved in any social system by those doing the work.

Learning is social, shared by a community of practitioners in pursuit of common results. The shared practice exists in a context, from local (for example, 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers trying to make a reading strategy for English language learners) to global (district office trying to create consistent curriculum focus). Yet most of what is learned about *what works, how to make it work, and why it works* remains tacit knowledge, hidden in the informal networks of relationships among teachers and administrators.

*Intentional* communities of practice work with the pre-existing social dynamic of adult learning and use it explicitly. The power of communities of practice is in making the invisible visible, and the tacit useable. Communities of practice focus on both the creating of community—connecting people around work that matters—and on practice—the technical and social architecture of how to do the work. An intentional community of practice is a social process for generating greater knowledge, rigor, consistency and innovation in complex systems, like schools. A sustainable community of practice focuses on a particular strand of practice. For instance, a CoP could be district-wide, focusing on closing the achievement gap; or it could be grade-level teachers, focused on achieving a math standard. A vibrant CoP network will have multiple local communities operating simultaneously, all linked by a global common purpose—increased student achievement.

### **Conversations as Core Process**

The practice of communities of practice rests on intentional, affirmative conversation. In other words, the core process of a CoP is conversation. This sounds simple, but to design the space that invites people to enter into a true, shared inquiry is not easy. The competing demands on teachers and administrators in public schools today have often created cultures of blame, fear, fragmentation and isolation. In such an environment, the vulnerability and exposure that is at the heart of shared inquiry and learning is difficult to



call forth. We've created an environment in which all of us are supposed to know the answers. Yet, *learning begins with not knowing.*

At the center of the practice of a CoP is the assumption that the answers we need to our most demanding questions already exist somewhere in the community or can be found together. Communities of practice begin with the questions, "*What's working and why?*" rather than "*What's wrong and who is to blame?*" Of course, we know that simply saying we are in an affirmative, appreciative inquiry is not enough to create one. Care must be given to create the conditions in which people can feel safe, develop trust over time, and experience both immediate and long-term positive impact on their practice. There is a significant call to leaders to focus their efforts on creating the conditions that will allow people to learn together.

As you experiment with new ways of convening communities of practice, please remember that these are simply tools to a more important end—creating real communities of inquiry and learning, focused on improving practice to serve all children.