

National Association of State Boards of Education

State Role in Incubating School Improvement Networks

By Gary Colletti

Failure is a vehicle for learning, including within education reform. Yet individual school leaders or teachers are no more comfortable learning from failure than their students are. It thus takes a collective effort within an established system to capitalize on failures. Many states, districts, and schools have formed networked improvement communities for just this purpose: to address problems of practice, make changes based on data, and make connections across schools.

Those engaged in these networks recognize that understanding the change process is as crucial as the change itself. Continuous school improvement requires a dramatic expansion of the capacity of individuals and organizations to understand and deal with deep, sustained changes. School networks build this capacity, and statewide networks of schools make it possible to bring innovations to scale.

Every school engages in school improvement. But without effective processes, low-performing schools cannot advance, at-risk schools cannot reverse course, and high-performing schools cannot share what works. Linked improvement efforts are intended to counteract the drift that highly rated schools experience when they are satisfied with how things are going and that low performers experience when they are discouraged from experimenting.

Improvement science has a long history, with roots in the health, manufacturing, computing, and business worlds and a nascent but growing application in education. Informed by applied research, structured groups study and

act to comprehend methods, theories, and factors that help or hurt school improvement.¹

As demonstrated in states such as Virginia, Hawaii, California, and Michigan, state boards of education are well positioned to nurture school improvement networks. They can convene stakeholders, and they can form a bridge for educators and others to learn from failures and change practice by building statewide relationships and social capital. Schools whose staff have cultivated positive professional relationships, share a common vision, and are invested in long-term improvement efforts have more potential to combine know-how and effect positive change.²

HOW IT WORKS

State-convened networked improvement communities can have many flavors, but they nonetheless share a few common qualities: They focus on a defined, statewide problem of practice; use research and a system of measures; and have a collectively developed theory of practice improvement. The networks engage in a structured process of learning from controlled efforts, failures, and the process itself. In this way, state boards can help networks observe how and why failures happen and reduce their frequency over time.

A team starts small, focusing on an area in which resources are used most ineffectively or inefficiently—learning time, for example. Members contribute perspectives from various role groups and parts of the state. Through in-person or virtual meetings, members ranging from “on the ground” in classrooms to the “thousand-foot view” explore root causes and changes that impact the entire state system. Then as the state team scales up, it tests the changes across diverse contexts with wide-ranging student populations.³ By making internal accountabil-

ity within the network the primary driver of change, networked improvement empowers stakeholders to generate context-specific, problem-focused solutions.⁴

Once a team targets primary changes that would likely have the most significant impacts, the team works through cycles of planning, implementing, studying, and acting. Team members share their experiences along the way until the process becomes habit.

STATE EXAMPLES

In its “Goals for Public Education in Virginia,” the **Virginia state board** voiced support for educators creating innovative instructional programs that can be replicated elsewhere. A statewide consortium of 13 districts is reexamining assessments, with a core focus on student agency for deeper learning. This networked improvement community seeks to involve students as stakeholders and plans to implement student-led learning in ways that align with their current assessment plan, lead to improvement across multiple contexts, and can be scaled to all interested districts.

In its plan to implement the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), **Tennessee** expressed a desire for networks to “foster innovation and social learning to improve student outcomes.” The Tennessee Department of Education and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, led by the Centers of Regional Excellence, created the Tennessee Early Literacy Network in 2016. Its focus is improving early literacy and developing a sustainable process for enacting and sharing practices. The network supports districts as they problem solve, find solutions to challenges, and improve student achievement in their local contexts.

The **Hawaii state board** and the education department’s ESSA team began exploring networked improvement communities in 2016. The state plan expressed interest in implementing complex innovations effectively, reliably, and at scale: “The objective here is quite different from the traditional pilot program that seeks to offer a proof of

concept. Improvement research, in contrast, is a focused learning journey.”⁵

The **Vermont** Agency of Education encourages improvement efforts statewide through its Education Quality Team. A 2017 document expressed the agency’s intention to offer technical assistance and support that would guide the formation of networked school improvement communities.⁶

The **California State Board of Education** is authorized to study the educational conditions and needs of the state, and plan improvement of the administration and efficiency of public schools. When authorized by statute, the board approves program plans. The High-Tech High school network formed a networked improvement community about college, career, and civic readiness with six national organizations and support from the Hewlett Foundation.

The **Michigan State Board of Education**, in partnership with the Michigan Department of Education, collected feedback from many stakeholders to aid in the design of its Top 10 in 10 Years initiative. The board seeks to “implement, use evidence and data to correct course, and continue with progress on key goals.”⁷ Concerned with schools that had the largest gap between highest and lowest performing students, the Michigan Focus Networked Improvement Community identified gaps in math achievement as their primary problem of practice. The network identified schools that had the largest gaps between highest and lowest performing students, examined the root causes, and proposed a focus on math fluency. They developed an intervention for students in the bottom 30 percent of math achievement and selected indicators to measure changes.

In the 2015–16 school year, **Minnesota** formed the Minnesota Statewide System of Support Networked Improvement Community to engage stakeholders in continuous improvement, including through needs assessments and data analyses. “Through a root-cause analysis, participants identified several factors that contribute to the problem of achievement gaps, including lack of knowledge about evidence-based practices; lack of professional development opportuni-

ties focused on closing achievement gaps; and insufficient communication,” according to a report of the Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest.⁸

STATE BOARDS’ ROLE

State boards can convene those with knowledge of the social, political, legal, and policy geographies in the state to lead, organize, and operate these networks. Leadership at the state level is critical early on for building a sustainable organizational structure.⁹ Networks may be loosely or tightly managed enterprises, they may share a platform, voluntarily associate support services, or share common principles that guide how the members conduct their efforts.

By providing design principles, curriculum, materials, technology, and professional learning opportunities to participating schools, statewide school networks that are nurtured by state boards are more likely to bring quality ideas to scale than the efforts of individual schools. State boards have the advantage of being able to see the entire system and help build consensus. They can question customs and established beliefs about student potential by comparing activities across schools that have varied demographic, geographic, structural, and historical contexts. Because improvement teams are continuously examining the conditions under which changes work and adapting to them, state boards can help reframe “failure” as a necessary part of the improvement journey.

Networked improvement communities need leaders to champion and nurture them at the state level. The National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance suggests that state decision makers “advocate for the process both at the state level and across the stakeholder groups represented in each networked improvement community.”¹⁰ Networked improvement communities, in turn, benefit from having members that understand the state education system and the social dynamics of stakeholders within it.

State boards can also help networks identify problems that are important throughout the state yet are specific enough for a network to act upon. By clarifying what is expected,

boards can encourage communication and consensus among stakeholders and lessen ambiguity. They can align networks’ theories of action with improvement policies, such as blueprints for statewide supports.

As more and more schools, districts, and states embrace disciplined school improvement methods, the capacity to learn from failures can be scaled statewide. States in which network participants both implement change and study how they did so can effectively reframe failures into powerful agents of learning.

Gary Colletti, NASBE’s editorial intern, studied the Carnegie Foundation’s model for networked improvement science during graduate studies at George Washington University.

NOTES

1 The Health Foundation, The Evidence Centre, “Evidence Scan: Improvement Science” (London, 2011).

2 Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider, “Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement” (New York: Russell Sage, 2002); Carrie Leana, “The Missing Link in School Reform,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (fall 2011).

3 Anthony S. Bryk, “Accelerating How We Learn to Improve,” *Educational Researcher* 44, no. 9 (2015): 467–77, doi:10.3102/0013189X15621543.

4 Jennifer A. O’Day and Marshall S. Smith, “Quality and Equality in American Education: Systemic Problems, Systemic Solutions,” in I. Kirsch and H. Braun, eds., *The Dynamics of Opportunity in America: Evidence and Perspectives* (Cham, Switzerland: Educational Testing Services/Springer International Publishing, 2016), doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-25991-8_9.

5 Hawaii, Governor’s ESSA Team, “Hawaii Blueprint for Public Education” (May 2017).

6 Vermont Agency of Education, “Education Quality and Continuous Improvement Framework: Research, Resources, and Support for Continuous Improvement Planning,” (Montpelier, VT, revised 2017).

7 Michigan Association of School Boards, “State Board of Education Approves Principles and Goals for Initiative,” Dashboard (December 2015).

8 Amy Proger et al., “Establishing and Sustaining Networked Improvement Communities: Lessons from Michigan and Minnesota,” REL 2017–264 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest, 2017).

9 Jennifer Russell, “How to Launch a Productive Network,” *Carnegie Common Blog* (New York: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, January 13, 2016).

10 Proger et al., “Lessons from Michigan and Minnesota.”