
Introduction

If it weren't for the network, I would no longer be a teacher.

We hear these words from our members on an almost daily basis. In a profession that hemorrhages a third of its practitioners every three years, and a half every five years, what keeps these particular teachers in the classroom year after year? What is the Teachers Network (TN) providing for these teachers? How is it meeting their needs? What are those needs?

This book is our attempt to answer these questions and to share the expertise developed by TN over decades of experience in forming successful networks. It is our belief that we have a significant contribution to offer the field, especially at this critical moment in the history of our nation's schools. Teacher attrition rates are skyrocketing—a problem compounded by the exodus of a generation of seasoned teachers. This retiring teacher force is being replaced by a cadre of novice teachers, more and more of whom are entering the profession with minimal preparation. At the same time, increasing pressure is being put on schools and universities to perform within a context of high-stakes testing and accountability.

TN was founded over twenty-eight years ago to address two problems endemic to the teaching profession: isolation from colleagues and cultural devaluation. A network of teachers who communicate across and between schools and districts can

1. help teachers break through the isolation so many experience while working within the confines of one classroom and/or one school, and
2. offer teachers recognition in a society in which an ongoing question to them is "Are you still teaching?"

We have helped break through teacher isolation by creating vehicles for teachers to connect with one another and share the work they have generated in their classrooms. We have honored teachers by awarding them grants and fellowships, recognizing them at award ceremonies, and adding their voices to the national conversation on education. All of these activities are offered with the goal of keeping good teachers teaching.

As our organization matured, we began adding affiliates—school districts, state education departments, education funds, and others that have adopted our model—and, in response to feedback from the increasing number of members joining our network, added other ways to help teachers grow as professionals. These have included

support and resources for new teachers in the form of multimedia professional development programs: online courses, videos of successful teaching practices in action on CD-ROMs, extensive website resources, and print materials. Because we have been at the forefront of using technology in education (the TN website was launched in the mid-1990s), providing professional development for teachers in using the Internet in the classroom has also become a priority. It was this addition to our programs that projected TN beyond national borders, and we now have teacher networks in the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom.

AN EDUCATION SUMMIT WITHOUT TEACHERS?! THE ORIGINS OF THE LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

Although all of the programs generated by our network have increased our knowledge and expertise about the power of teacher networks, it is our move

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into the advocacy world that most informs this book. In 1989, President George H. W. Bush and then Governor Clinton held the first education summit; incredibly, not one teacher was invited. At that point, TN was entering its tenth year. We already had an excellent track record of documenting and disseminating curriculum (as affirmed by a

longitudinal study [Mann, 1983]), but now our organization took a giant leap into a vacuum that desperately needed to be filled. Where was the teacher's voice in the national debate on school reform? Utilizing and building on our expertise and experience about teacher networks—everything we had learned during the past decade—we began what has evolved into the Teachers Network Leadership Institute (TNLI).

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schools, develop policy recommendations based on their findings, write cases to facilitate discussions with policymakers, and document and disseminate their work locally and nationally.

This is the best professional development I have ever had.

This is the statement we most often hear from TNLI fellows. In this book, we will distill for you how to create this “best professional development.” Our gift to you is what we have learned through growing, nurturing, and expanding this network over the past ten years to currently include fourteen nationwide affiliates.

JUST WHAT IS A TEACHERS NETWORK?

While networks and professional learning communities can vary greatly in context and size, at TN we define a local network as a group of at least ten teachers—although we have had groups as large as fifty—who come together at least once a month locally and serve as affiliates within our larger nationwide network. Teachers join our network through a competitive process that involves a written application, recommendations, and a group interview. Typically, these teachers are those who have come into teaching to make a difference and feel either frustrated or limited by their own classroom and/or school setting. They are eager to develop the knowledge and skills to affect public education. These teachers are the ones we want to keep teaching, and we help them do so by offering them ways in which to grow.

The following is a summary of what we know about the characteristics of successful networks from Ann Lieberman, who has worked directly with the TNLI as our first national advisor (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996), and from our own wealth of practical experience as pioneers in this field.

In a successful network,

1. the agendas are challenging, not prescriptive, and are responsive to members and their particular needs;
2. the learning environment is more indirect than direct—a result of new commitments and friendships, exposure to new ideas, and contact with and observation of other educators' work;
3. the formats are collaborative, not individualistic—members work interdependently;
4. the work is more integrated than fragmented;
5. the leadership is facilitative, not directive;
6. thinking from multiple perspectives is encouraged;
7. shared values are both context specific and generalized; and
8. the organizational structure is more movement-like than organization-like.

Overall, networks are exciting, alternative forms of teacher and school development. They provide a dynamic way to help teachers

- direct their own learning;
- sidestep the limitations of institutional roles, hierarchies, and geographic locations;
- work with many different kinds of people;
- break through isolation;
- connect with others who are passionate about their work;
- introduce new ideas, projects, materials, and ways to motivate students;
- develop new skills (i.e., presentation skills, grant-writing skills);
- feel supported for risk taking; and
- become technologically literate.

OUR NETWORK

First and foremost, a teacher network is managed. We know that teachers, due to the demands of their teaching loads, lesson preparation, paper grading, parent communication, and school responsibilities, are short on time and support. It takes someone other than a teacher in the network to hold the network together—whether to schedule and plan face-to-face meetings or facilitate the use of virtual communications. Each of our networks has a director who is responsible for programming and managing it, supporting the teachers in developing relationships with policymakers, and taking action through advocacy. Our networks also have university advisors who support the teachers in conducting action research studies in their classrooms and schools.

Although TN provides teachers with a nationwide network, it is the local networks that recruit, induct, and maintain teacher participation. Local networks come on board through a variety of partnerships and relationships that we actively seek and broker. Over the years, TN has offered this opportunity to education funds, school districts, state departments of education, and universities. In some cases, foundations have also served to catalyze these local networks. The process of affiliates is ongoing and dynamic, with an average of one new affiliate joining each year.

To date, TNLI affiliates are located in the following areas:

- Chicago (IL)—The Chicago Foundation of Education. One of the network's founding affiliates, Chicago TNLI is composed of elementary and middle school teachers in this urban district. The advisor is from National Louis University.
- Fairfax County (VA)—Fairfax County Public Schools. Also one of TNLI's founding affiliates, this network brings together suburban teachers in a district committed early on to supporting teacher research in the classroom.
- Gainesville (FL)—University of Florida. Brought on board a few years ago as a result of a special grant opportunity forged through the Holmes Partnership, the leadership at this affiliate was seeking a national network to build upon its rich tradition of supporting professional learning communities and teacher research.
- Los Angeles (CA)—Teacher-leaders in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Originally under the aegis of the local education fund, this affiliate continues under the direction of area TNLI founding fellows.
- Mason (VA)—George Mason University. Also formed with support from the Holmes Partnership, the university seized on this opportunity to strengthen and maintain its work with its professional development schools and to include participation by its education policy department in its network.
- Miami (FL)—The Education Fund. Comprising teachers from throughout this urban district, this affiliate works in close partnership with Barry University.
- Milwaukee (WI)—Milwaukee Partnership Academy. This network was galvanized by the then incoming president of Holmes, who saw the value of TNLI for this city's teachers. Primary support comes from the National Education Association.

- New York City (NY)—Teachers Network. The national office of TN manages a local affiliate for New York City public school teachers in partnership with the New York University Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, as well as the United Federation of Teachers. Approximately forty teachers, from throughout the five boroughs, comprise this network annually.
- Sacramento (CA)—California State University. Also developed initially through a Holmes grant opportunity, this network continues to involve teachers from districts in the greater Sacramento area.
- Santa Barbara County (CA)—Santa Barbara County Office of Education. Another founding affiliate, this network comprises teachers from twenty-three primarily suburban and rural school districts and is in partnership with the University of California, Santa Barbara.
- San Francisco (CA)—San Francisco Education Fund. The board of this education fund has made a major commitment to provide ongoing support for this local network of urban teachers. It is in partnership with San Francisco State University.
- State of Delaware—The Rodel Charitable Foundation. Originally brokered by the former dean of the School of Education at the University of Delaware and introduced to teachers statewide through an invitation by the governor, this affiliate has major support from a foundation committed to supporting education in the state.
- State of Kentucky—University of Kentucky. The newest TNLI affiliate to date, the Collaborative Center for Literacy Development has come on board after being exposed to our work at the International Teacher Research Conference. This affiliate expands on TN's longtime relationship with the Fayette County Public Schools by bringing network participation to teachers throughout the state.
- State of Wyoming—Wyoming Department of Education. A network jump-started by endorsement by the governor and maintained through substantial direct state support, this TNLI affiliate connects teachers throughout urban, suburban, and rural districts statewide. It works in partnership with the University of Wyoming.

ACTING LOCALLY AND NATIONALLY

What makes TN particularly appealing to a broad cross-section of all education stakeholders is that it engages teachers at the local level while also connecting them at the national level. People are looking for ways to bridge the schoolhouse, statehouse, and all constituencies. The teachers we are attracting are those who want to make a difference, not only for their own students but also in powerful ways that affect students and schools throughout the nation.

Nationally, we are building upon the work of policy researchers such as Linda Darling-Hammond (1996) and Milbrey McLaughlin (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993), who have attempted to help policymakers think differently about policy and the implementation of that policy. All agree that we need to improve schools and help

teachers, and these policy researchers are focusing on how to do it. Policy researchers maintain that a real understanding of the connection between policy and practice depends on teachers creating professional communities where many of the problems and tensions associated with education policy are addressed and alleviated. Research is showing that, when teachers work together to focus on student learning and when they make public their struggles associated with teaching and learning—and also when they can plan, invent, adapt, and problem solve together as a community (be it within a department, school, district, union, or network)—they start solving many of the problems associated with education policy. This kind of professional community thus mediates between policy, which attempts to make changes, and the practice of teachers. The work of McLaughlin, Darling-Hammond, and others has given us an understanding of how to organize not just for school change but to change the culture of schools and create learning communities for teachers. Teachers need to be involved to help determine what policies will support the practices that improve student learning and create professional communities of teachers.

TNLI, with guidance and technical assistance from the national office, provides the vehicle and mechanisms for teachers locally and nationally to improve their classroom practice while simultaneously addressing the myriad frustrations they experience daily as a result of limited input. Participation in the network also provides multiple, ongoing opportunities to use action research generated by these teachers to develop specific recommendations to improve teaching and learning.

Finally, I have an opportunity to have my voice heard.

We have infused this book with the same philosophy that guides all our work. Ultimately, a network is by teachers, for teachers. In that spirit, we have let the network speak for itself. Complementing each chapter are direct narratives and quotations from teachers, directors, and advisors who comprise our network. We asked the teachers why they joined the network, how they have made a difference as a result of their participation, and how they are helping to sustain and expand it. We also asked our directors and advisors to write about pivotal experiences that made this work come together for them—including hurdles they overcame and some of their successes to date.

Each of the following chapters offers how-tos and lessons learned to enable educators to start, manage, sustain, and expand their own networks. The end results of a successful network are those that anyone who cares about education will embrace:

- The retention of dedicated teachers
- The improvement of classroom practice
- The development of teacher leadership
- The effective participation of teachers in policy discussions and decisions

Our goal in writing this book is to provide you with the knowledge, understanding, and tools to create a local network. We would also welcome you into our national network. Join your colleagues and see what a community of teachers can accomplish together!