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FEATURE ARTICLE

ILLINOIS AND WISCONSIN JOIN NATIONAL NETWORK

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It seems that everywhere we look today—from offices, movie theaters, and classrooms to presidential press conferences—people are engaged in communication of one kind or another, frantically e-mailing, text messaging, and responding to the insistent chirp of a cell phone. One could argue that communication as a process is at an all-time high. There is, however, a huge gap between the process of communicating and any reliable, tangible results of that process. The question becomes, how purposeful is all of this so-called “communication”? In addition, if *communication* is defined as “an exchange of information,” what happened to the community in the process? As John Dewey noted in *Democracy and Education* (1916), “There is more than a verbal tie between the words *common*, *community*, and *communication* [italics added].” Or at least there should be. Effective and sustained communication is the foundation of a vibrant community.

New National Network

To promote such communication among states and comprehensive centers, a new national network has been formed. The National Network of State School Improvement Leaders (NNSSIL) is a new initiative developed to provide a platform for states to communicate both with each other and with the national network of comprehensive centers. It is a collaboration managed by the Center on Innovation & Improvement (CII) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). NNSSIL currently has members from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. Its website is <http://www.centerii.org/leaders/>.

Common Need

Since the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was instituted as an initiative affecting the education system of the entire country, the federal government has recognized the need for a nationwide system that would support states in their individual and collective efforts to improve the educational success of districts and schools. In 2006, the government established a national network of 16 regional comprehensive centers (RCCs) and five national content centers to provide support to state departments of education on educational issues. As part of this innovative process, the federally funded RCCs would provide technical assistance and other specialized services to states as they worked to help districts and schools implement school improvement programs. The national content centers would serve as one of several sources of information as the two types of agencies worked in tandem to help close achievement gaps and reach student performance goals required by the NCLB Act.

The team approach of RCCs and national content centers was a new initiative to help states achieve change and improve education. Efficient and regular communication is crucial to the success of this design. In general, the thinking was that states would contact their RCC requesting assistance and, depending on the topic, the RCC would tap into the resources of one of the appropriate content centers. Along with its own specialists and technical assistance, the RCC would provide the resultant resources to increase and enhance the capacity of the state. The process seemed reasonable and attainable as designed; however, as the work progressed, a need emerged to enhance communication and to help states exchange information efficiently, meaningfully, and in a timely way.

For those immersed in the RCC system, the problem of supporting effective communication among the states was well recognized. Linda Miller, director of Great Lakes West Comprehensive Center, recognized the problem and initiated preliminary discussions aimed at resolving the issue. Miller notes, "Great Lakes West is often asked by our states to provide information about the initiatives in other states. Wisconsin and Illinois want to know not only what is happening but also why the other states choose a specific approach and how the states are carrying out the work. We simply didn't have an efficient way to collect information, so we had to rely on calling individual states to find the answers."

Similarly, as the communication director for the Center on Innovation & Improvement (CII), I have monthly conversations with representatives of the 16 RCCs. The conversation often turns to what is happening in the other states—more precisely, what other states are doing to resolve an issue or approach a problem. With 50 other groups of colleagues in the mix, the chances are high that one state already would have faced an issue or grappled with a problem being faced by another state. However, a venue dedicated to direct discussion and sharing knowledge was not readily available until NNSSIL was created.

Community Response

CII and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) had been in discussion for several months about how to facilitate a responsive information exchange between the states and planned to launch their proposal for a learning community designed to respond to this need at the 2009 CII Institute for School Improvement and Education Options. Meanwhile, Miller and her team at Great Lakes West, along with several other RCCs, were engaged in discussions on a parallel track. Both teams of discussants convened and collaborated on an initiative that would bridge the gap between the centers and the states. Miller notes, "We proposed creating a group in which the states could actively communicate with each other. We felt the states would be more likely to get just-in-time information, and the information would be at the depth needed to be most useful for our states." What emerged from these discussions was NNSSIL. Miller notes, "The network developed by CCSSO, CII, and the RCCs will benefit both the RCCs and state staff. It is a vehicle for communicating information that will help the comprehensive centers work more effectively with their states and help the states develop important relationships and share information with their colleagues in other states."

Communication Network

NNSSIL is in the early stages of development and already is serving as a platform for discussion to provide continuous learning among members to most effectively lead a strong statewide system of support in each state and territory. A design team has been selected to represent the network membership; it is composed of representatives from 11 SEAs and five RCCs and is facilitated by Nina de las Alas (CCSSO) and Steve Schenck (CII). The design team has had several productive meetings and is charged with facilitating regular discussion on important issues selected by the states and supporting formal and informal communication. The design team listens to the needs and opinions of the state representatives in the network and works closely to have the network serve as a venue that represents and encourages contributions from all of its members. De las Alas notes, "We have a great core group on the design team. Our meeting in San Antonio

was very productive, and most members of the design team were able to participate. One of the working premises of the network is to use an inquiry-based process to generate innovative ways to build capacity and sustain systemic change. This is exciting work and a great opportunity to share knowledge across states.”

Schenck is equally optimistic, stating, “Throughout my career in education, it has been the professional conversations with my job-alike colleagues that have moved my thinking and practice forward. This was true [in my work] as an English teacher, a Kentucky distinguished educator, and it would have been true [in my work] as the associate commissioner of the Office of Leadership and School Improvement if this network had existed. Professionals in every state and territory are wrestling with similar issues involving state and federal accountability and consequences. These professionals now have a very intentional vehicle to share challenges and solutions with each other, making them all more effective in delivering for the neediest kids in the country.”

In addition to serving as a forum for member discussion, part of the NNSSIL agenda is delivering Web-based presentations from experts on topics of interest to the states. A recent webinar, attended by 100 state and RCC staff, featured Zollie Stevenson, Jr., Ph.D. (U.S. Department of Education), and Lauren Morando Rhim, Ph.D. (a member of CII’s Scientific Council), talking about restructuring. Rachel Trimble, who represents Great Lakes West on the design team, remarks, “Wisconsin and Illinois found the opportunity to participate and the chance to explore common issues with their colleagues invaluable. Working together to create a network for professional learning is definitely a move in the right direction for them, particularly since they are both engaged in initiatives to improve their statewide system of support; they continue to work hard on this and benefit from hearing others’ experiences and sharing the results of their own efforts.”

What’s Next for the Network?

The NNSSIL website offers a community site, providing a platform where members can share concerns, opportunities, documents, and reach out to peers for information and opportunities to talk at any time on topics of their choice. Profiles and pictures of the members will be included to help personalize the Web-based platform. The community also is invited to communicate and collaborate with peers through a message board as well as through e-mail. A message thread is in place to continue the discussion on restructuring that was started in the first webinar and as another way to encourage collaborative communication between the members of the network. Topics for future webinars also are being discussed and will feature experts in the field. NNSSIL plans to schedule several webinars a year with follow-up online discussions.

The design team schedules regular team calls and will continue to advise the NNSSIL coordinators on the needs, priorities, and activities of the network. Most important, each member of NNSSIL is encouraged to participate actively and contribute so that the partnership can continue to serve as a valuable resource for current and pertinent information. Moving forward, a primary focus of NNSSIL is to keep the lines of communication open between the comprehensive centers and the states, to work collaboratively so that all parties are represented and heard, and to support timely and efficient communication on common issues across states. In addition, the potential for a two-way process of communication with the U.S. Department of Education is in the early stages and has shown encouraging signs as another possible venue for collaborative communication.

References

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