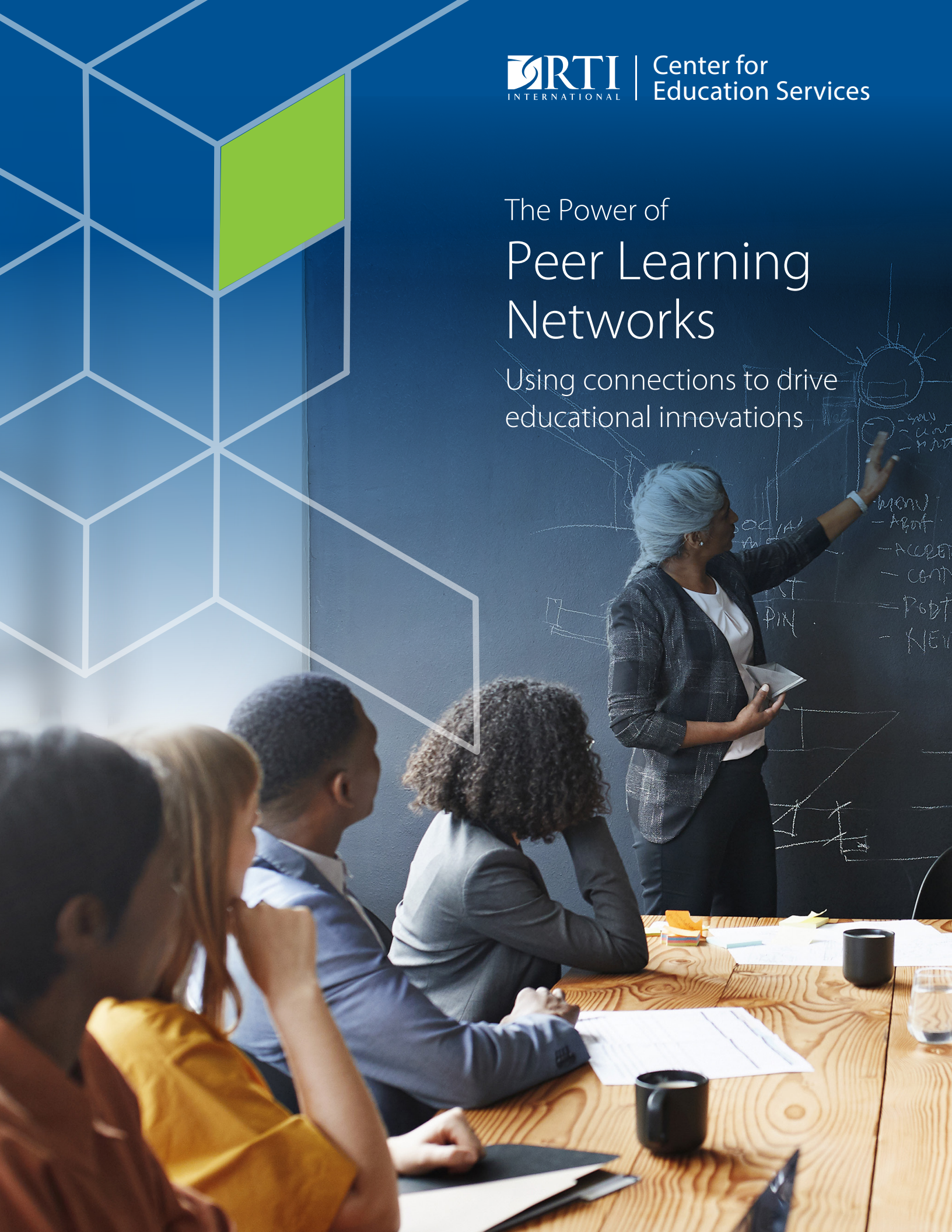


The Power of Peer Learning Networks

Using connections to drive
educational innovations



About the RTI Center for Education Services

The RTI Center for Education Services partners with educators to promote thriving learning environments that facilitate success for all students. From the classroom to the boardroom, our work focuses on four areas that we believe are levers for change in education: strengthening instruction, developing leaders, improving organizational operations, and facilitating collaborative networks.

Education has a monumental and compounding impact throughout a person's life by opening doors and broadening opportunities. At the societal level, education affects the economic vitality of communities, states, and nations. We partner with educators who understand and act on the trends and practices that create possibilities for learners at all levels.

We're partnering with K-12 educators to challenge the status quo by providing job-embedded support tailored to meet the needs of these educators. We apply a passionate, professional, and no-nonsense approach to drive meaningful solutions that are both actionable and sustainable. Technical assistance is always customized to best meet the unique needs of each context.

Our staff members endeavor to turn knowledge into practice through rigorous research and hands-on implementation support. Every education project benefits from an integrated approach that offers access to the breadth of content expertise, staff experience, and research insight that differentiates us from our competitors.

Contact



Frank McKay
Manager, Education Services


hmckay@rti.org
919.541.7344

Learn more at rti.org/centers/education-services

Peer Learning Network

A connected community of people who work together to learn, collaborate, and innovate with shared purpose





During the spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced many schools across the nation to drastically shift the ways they educate students. As our nation's schools and communities waded into these uncharted waters, one previously underestimated support system arose to help with the challenges: **peer learning networks.**



The problem: Dealing with complex issues in isolation

Educators and administrators often work in isolation. They may not have the opportunity to collaborate with others, and they may not know how best to communicate with peers. Although they can have the same problems of practice as their peers across the school, state, and nation, their isolation can result in sporadic, disconnected solutions and relatively small pockets of innovation, which remain secluded within their classroom, school, or district bubbles, rarely getting shared with others.

Isolation can significantly slow the rate of innovation in education.



The catalyst: Challenging contexts

In particularly trying times (such as during a pandemic), innovation must happen quickly to address momentous challenges. Solutions must be developed and shared with urgency.

A swift rate of innovation is crucial to overcoming challenges.



A powerful solution: Peer learning networks

Well-organized, purposeful peer learning networks can connect people with similar needs and support the immediate flow of ideas.

Peer learning networks support and accelerate innovation.

A Case in Point

Before the pandemic, a group of North Carolina superintendents participated in a peer learning network facilitated by our team at RTI International and specifically designed to meet the needs of the largest school districts¹ in the state. As school shutdowns began in North Carolina, these superintendents gathered virtually for their regular network meeting, which took on a whole new purpose: how to best support students and staff in this time of tremendous need. This shared problem of practice eclipsed all other issues, and these district leaders instantly turned to each other to share ideas, solutions, and resources, and ultimately, to find a way through—together. Their network of fellow education leaders who were all experiencing similar challenges quickly became a cornerstone in the effort to address complex issues in a rapidly changing landscape. Now more than ever, their peer learning network provided the connections and collective expertise needed to face imminent, multifaceted challenges with equally comprehensive solutions.



The Power of Networks

Effective peer learning networks can be powerful catalysts for change. Well-designed networks create value for members in several ways. Peer learning networks can

- 1 provide opportunities for members to learn and collaborate around common goals;
- 2 allow members to share expertise and develop solutions to common problems of practice;
- 3 facilitate the co-creation and sharing of tools and resources among members; and
- 4 provide systems of support across challenging environments.

1. The North Carolina Large District Consortium includes the superintendents from the 12 largest districts—the biggest of which has approximately 150,000 students. Collectively, these 12 districts represent over 720,000 students; this is more than 50% of the students in North Carolina.



Moving into a very large school district with over 40 schools to work with—it was really important to have an opportunity to work with a network of leaders that were in similar roles that I can learn from. We can problem-solve together.

Dr. Crystal Hill
Assistant Superintendent,
Curriculum & Instruction
Cabarrus County Schools

Peer learning networks can be especially important for educators and education leaders who tend to have roles without peers in their educational institution (e.g., superintendents, principals, chief academic officers, etc.). Without network connections, they typically must address problems independently. Through a network, these members receive regular access to peers in similar roles with whom they can share best practices, engage in common problem-solving, and speak as one voice to influencers and policy-makers.

Network members with similar roles connect for a common purpose that often includes overcoming shared challenges. The concept of “shared stuff,” introduced by Ken Everett in *Designing the Networked Organization* (2011), describes both tangible and intangible elements that promote relationships. Common challenges are addressed both within and outside of network meetings through relationships built on foundations of shared context and identity.

It is important to note that effective networks don’t just happen—they are intentionally designed (Plastrik, Taylor, and Cleveland, 2014). Considerations to be made when building a network include determining the network’s

- purpose or reason for being,
- membership eligibility and size,
- benefits to its members,
- funding availability, and
- process for decision-making.

These considerations are crucial in determining the fundamental structure and framework that will define the network, but once a network is started, it is equally important to guide its initial development with a key set of operating principles. These principles will help shape the network’s culture, conduct, and expectations. Examples of network principles can include ensuring *the network members do the work* and keeping *network decisions open and transparent* (Plastrik, Taylor, and Cleveland, 2014). By leveraging best practices in design and facilitation, peer learning networks can become powerful, valuable sources of learning, growth, and support for members.

RTI's Approach to Peer Learning Networks

RTI supports lasting change in education, and we believe the best way to promote change is through a comprehensive approach that integrates four drivers of meaningful change in education: strengthening teaching and learning, developing leaders, improving operations through strategic consulting, and facilitating collaborative peer networks. RTI's Center for Education Services develops and facilitates networks to help educators create change within their schools, districts, and communities, as well as the education system. RTI's networks foster connections between educators, policy-makers, and thought leaders. These networks represent a powerful opportunity for collaboration and scale.

Core network activities include



- 1 fostering communities of practice,
- 2 addressing common concerns,
- 3 building capacity of network members,
- 4 disseminating research,
- 5 analyzing policies, and
- 6 working for continuous improvement.

RTI's work with networks is guided by the recognition that peer teaching accelerates adult learning. The principle of cognitive congruence suggests that the gap between experts and novices is better addressed by leveraging peers to co-teach and explain content and concepts in relatable ways (Jauregui et al., 2018). Additionally, when networks grow in size and collective expertise, they can have an expanded "network effect," providing increased value to members as they grow and evolve. RTI's approach leverages expertise within the network to facilitate sustained learning and growth among members.



RTI networks bring additional benefits to their members by creating opportunities to address policy and influence local and state policy contexts. When facilitating networks, RTI acts as both a convener and a connector by providing members with research and policy insights to support informed decision-making and intentional action. Network members gain access to insights and analysis on policies specific to members' schools and districts at network events and through shared connections. They can then use their collective voice, representing a larger number of students to engage with decision-makers and leaders. Networks thereby provide a support and advocacy structure as well as the opportunity to expand individual and collective influence to affect systemic change.

Key tenets of network design are supported through common activities across all networks, including

- 1 regularly scheduled network meetings focused on annual goals,
- 2 connections among members between meetings, and
- 3 opportunities for in-depth learning.

Regularly scheduled network meetings focused on annual goals. Across our networks, we engage members in regular face-to-face and virtual meetings to build and cultivate relationships, develop cohesion, and create a foundation of trust, all of which lead to increased problem-solving and knowledge transfer. Network meetings provide members the opportunity to connect with each other about topics relevant to their roles. Within all networks, members share successful practices and learn from each other through structured discussions and a variety of activities designed to help members address collective challenges. Network meeting agendas include conversations with thought leaders and decision-makers, book studies, problems of practice, and discussions of key issues, such as equity in schools, data analysis, and standards and curriculum review.

Connections among members between meetings. RTI network leaders create meaningful touch points for members between convenings through virtual meetings and phone calls, as well as email communications. These touch points might include relevant policy updates, regular support calls, or less formal ad hoc meetings. RTI also encourages asynchronous connections among members through its Amaze digital collaboration and networking platform. By facilitating and fostering between-meeting connections, networks create additional opportunities for members to reach out to one another, share expertise, and use each other as resources.

Opportunities for in-depth learning. Providing common learning experiences has proven to be a powerful way to further shared learning and collaboration. In-depth learning can come from research, from engagement with experts, and from strategic visits to peer schools and districts. Network learning visits can be especially powerful as they provide the opportunity for members to visit and learn from one another's schools and districts. RTI facilitators use structured discussion and reflection to debrief the visits and extend member learning.

Members connect with each other: in a recent survey of network members 76% of respondents indicated they have been in contact with other members outside of regularly scheduled network activities for information sharing, problem-solving, and support.

Continuous Improvement

Across our network engagements, we use emerging research in improvement science to facilitate the learning of members. RTI's approach includes use of a network improvement model that we have designed and honed over time to ensure continuous improvement. The model focuses on three overarching goals:

- **Solution development.** Members identify essential dilemmas, define outcomes, and collaboratively create and implement plans to address issues.
- **Network performance.** Members improve their collective capacity to operate at a high level as they address existing and future challenges.
- **Individual growth.** Members deepen individual skill sets that contribute to the performance of their districts and transfer to work with other teams.

By emphasizing continuous improvement and providing a framework for reflection and growth, RTI models the work we expect from networks while at the same time supporting networks in intentional planning and data-based reflection.

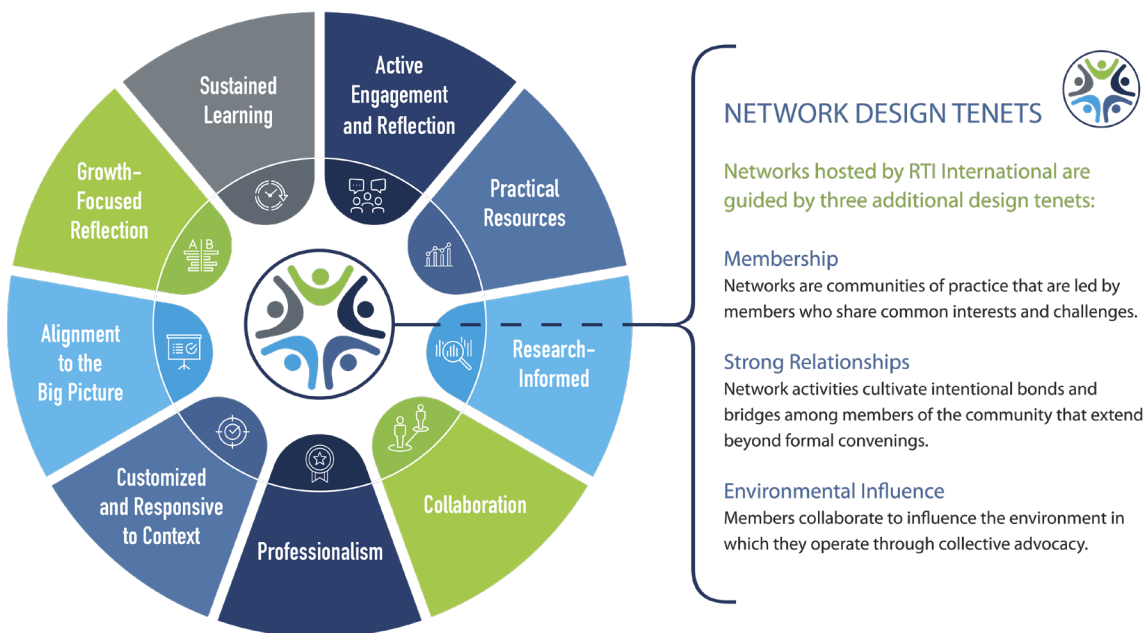


Network Design

RTI’s approach to working with educators and education leaders is grounded in nine research-based tenets of professional learning. These tenets provide a foundation for our work in designing and facilitating networks:

- **Active engagement and reflection.** Professional learning is experiential in nature; members move, read, write, think, discuss, and reflect on experience to develop knowledge and skills.
- **Practical resources.** Members receive tools and resources that can be immediately used in classroom, school, and district contexts.
- **Research-informed learning.** Professional learning is connected to a research base that supports learning strategies, content, and targeted outcomes.
- **Collaboration.** Members engage in purposeful collaboration to share ideas, address problems of practice, build expertise, and develop networks of support.
- **Professionalism.** Learning is led by experienced educators who are well versed in implementation strategies; educators are treated as professionals who bring valuable experience to their practice.
- **Customized and responsive to context.** Professional learning is co-planned with member input to ensure contextual relevance and use of appropriate data.
- **Alignment to the big picture.** Professional learning is deliberately connected to goals and curriculum; coherence with school/district goals and practices is prioritized.
- **Growth-focused reflection.** Professional learning includes opportunities for personal and team reflection, and embedded evaluation contributes to continuous tailoring and improvement.
- **Sustained learning.** Support following professional learning is purposeful, ranging from virtual check-ins to job-embedded coaching, to support educator needs and capacity-building.

In addition to the nine tenets of professional learning, our work in developing and leading networks is guided by three core design tenets: membership, strong relationships, and environmental influence.





Membership

Members take an active role in the network by shaping the context and direction of the group, supporting other members' needs through intentional bonds, and speaking as one voice to policy-makers. Through intentional design and facilitation, RTI staff work to empower members to engage in meaningful ways and to co-create opportunities for learning and collaboration so that members meet both their individual and collective network goals.



Strong Relationships

Strong relationships are critical to strong networks. RTI works to build strong connections among members during face-to-face and virtual convenings—and beyond convenings as well.

During network meetings, members share successful strategies, explore problems of practice, and address common challenges, while building strong relationships that allow them to support one another beyond the structure of the network group. These strong relationships help facilitate the spread of knowledge and practices throughout the network. To support the development of relationships and collective learning, we serve as guides rather than presenters or trainers. This requires an intentional cultivation of safety in interactions. Feeling safe leads to trust, and trust leads to vulnerability, where authentic problems can be addressed.

Beyond Convenings: Making Meaningful Connections

To support meaningful member connections between convenings, RTI leverages technology to strengthen relationships and enhance the sharing of expertise and resources. We do this with Amaze.

Amaze is a digital collaboration platform where members interact asynchronously. Network members share resources, collect information, and organize initiatives. Members also use Amaze to request assistance and guidance from other members.

Amaze allows members to

- continue to build connections and strengthen relationships beyond convenings;
- have asynchronous access to members, expertise, and resources; and
- connect across geographic boundaries.





Environmental Influence

In the context of networks, environmental influence can mean individuals using learning from the network to influence the systems in which they work. It can also refer to the ability of networks to speak with a common voice on issues related to collective goals. Because of their collective voice, strength in numbers, and common position, networks of educators can influence policy discussions at the local and state levels. Networks can provide members with connections to regional and state leaders, as well as to other relevant decision-makers. These connections can be challenging for individual districts and schools to make on their own, especially in rural areas and in larger systems. Once network members develop relationships, they can benefit from their collective voice outside the network. Gaining experience with policy engagement in the network can help members see that education practitioners can, and should, have a leadership role in the policy-making process. Once they have been exposed to this role firsthand, educators can build on their experience to continue to affect change in this way.



In a recent survey of network members, 83% of respondents indicated they already have or plan to collaborate with other network members to contact education leaders and decision-makers about challenges facing students, teachers, and schools.





As an administrator, the higher you go, the lonelier it gets—but you need to talk to somebody, and you need answers. This network allows me to reach out to other administrators who may have dealt with similar situations that I’m dealing with. There’s a closeness in the network, a dependency. RTI pushes me to grow as a professional educator. I in turn pass those same ideals along to my staff and my students—so it all goes back to “Is that what’s best for students?” I’m a growth mindset person; I want to see what the next step is, I want to grow, and RTI has afforded me that opportunity.

Stephen G. Basnight, III
Superintendent, Hyde County Schools



Network Examples and Benefits

At RTI, we use our expertise and experience as network designers to provide a customized approach in working with very different types of networks: small networks, large networks, networks with members in unique roles, and networks with multiple types of members. RTI has developed and continues to facilitate numerous state-level networks, including the North Carolina Large District Consortium, North Carolina Alternative Learning Programs and Schools, and the Early College Network (ECN). Our work with national networks includes facilitation of the Defense STEM Education Consortium (DSEC). Based on various factors, including a given network's topic, design, purpose, and funding, some networks are closed to new members whereas others are open—examples of both are included below.

North Carolina Large District Consortium

The North Carolina Large District Consortium encompasses individual networks for superintendents, chief academic officers, and math and science curriculum leaders.

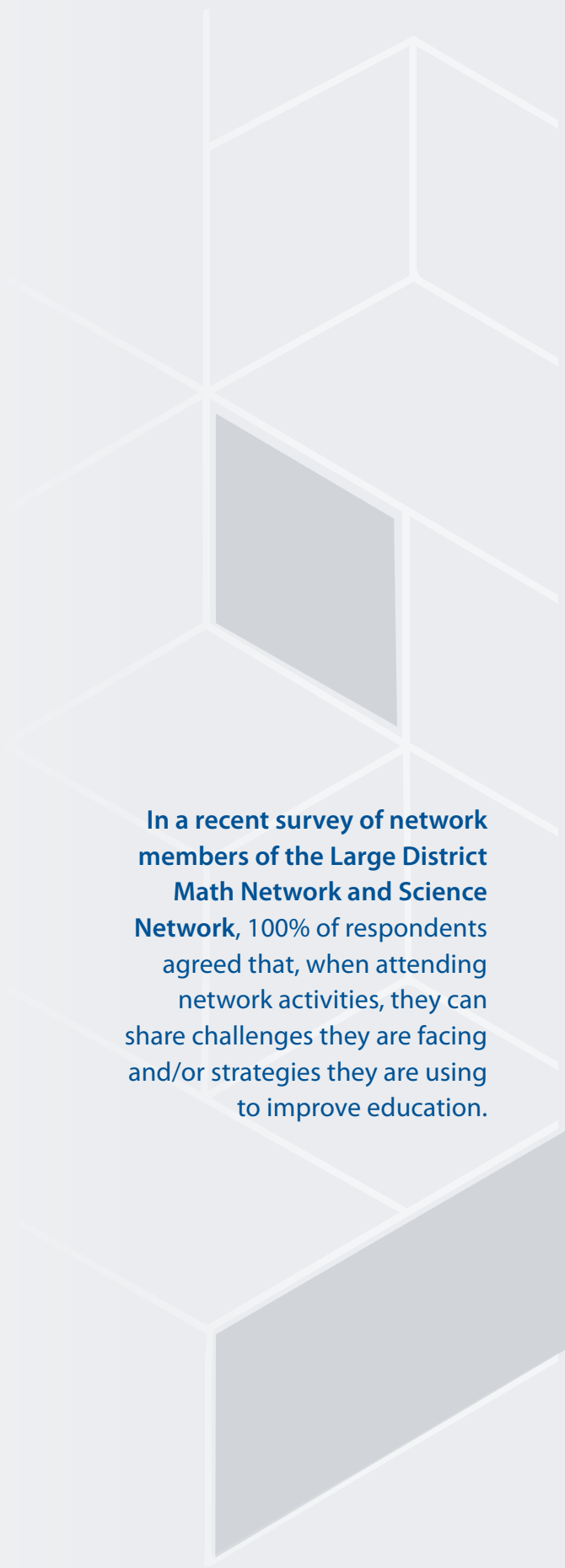
In the *Large District Superintendent Network*, the superintendents from the 12 largest districts in North Carolina have met as a network for over 9 years. The goal of the network is to improve the practice of superintendents who lead large systems and to inform policy-makers of practitioners' perspectives as policies are developed. At the request of the State Board of Education chairman, the network started to provide a regular connection between the State Board and the largest school districts in the state.

The *Large District CAO Network* encompasses the same 12 districts as the superintendent network but involves their chief academic officers (CAOs). The network began in 2015 and provides the time and space for members to work on common problems of practice across their districts, including challenges related to curriculum, instruction, assessment, and state policy. CAOs play a diverse set of roles in their districts, and the role of the CAO can vary from one district to another. To understand the different responsibilities among the participating CAOs, the RTI team has worked with network members to develop a responsibility matrix to understand the aspects of their districts under their supervision. All the CAOs identified responsibility for K–12 core curriculum and instruction, pre-K/early learning, and federal programs as key responsibilities. More than half also identified responsibilities for special education, English language learners, academically and intellectually gifted students, professional learning, career and technical education, accountability, and principal supervision/evaluation.

The *Large District Math Network* and *Large District Science Network* involve members from the same districts as the superintendent and CAO networks and aim to provide content-specific support to strengthen math and science teaching and learning in the largest NC school systems. Both the math and science networks operate as subnetworks to the CAO network.

Math leaders from the large districts convened for the first time with RTI's support in spring 2017 at the request of the CAO Network. During this initial meeting, RTI helped members develop four tenets for focus: conceptual understanding, equity, student-centered focus, and vertical alignment. The job descriptions of member math leaders differ from district to district, but these are typically central office positions with responsibility for elementary or secondary math or are combined positions. Depending on the structure of math leadership within the district, each district may have one or two members in the network. The district math leaders also often have a team of instructional facilitators under their supervision. Convening as a network gives these district math leaders an important opportunity to learn and collaborate with colleagues across their varied contexts.

RTI developed the science network during 2018–19 after receiving seed funding to bring together science educators from across the state. The network began with an initial meeting in fall 2018 to envision what the network would look like, identify priorities for science education, and determine the focus of the network activities. Most large district consortium members have identified at least one science network representative, with roles varying from K–12 science curriculum specialists to science/social studies leaders and STEM specialists. Some districts include both a district-based person and a school-based person as members.



In a recent survey of network members of the Large District Math Network and Science Network, 100% of respondents agreed that, when attending network activities, they can share challenges they are facing and/or strategies they are using to improve education.

North Carolina Alternative Learning Programs and Schools Network

RTI engages with the SERVE Center at UNC-Greensboro to support an **Alternative Learning Programs and Schools (ALPS)** network. To best serve their populations of students who are at risk, alternative school leaders must navigate a series of organizational challenges. The challenges range from staffing qualified personnel to engaging families as partners after years, and in some cases, generations, of negative schooling experiences. With member leadership in mind, RTI facilitated a planning and design process with members so that programming is co-designed to amplify best practices through an engaged community that works to end negative perceptions and professional isolation while addressing critical problems of practice.

The ALPS Network strategically supports a community of practice for alternative school leaders to collaborate and share research-based strategies for improving student engagement and outcomes. Priorities of the network include the following:



- enhance the knowledge and skills of ALPS members to navigate the unique challenges associated with alternative schools;
- develop an ALPS framework of competencies that support leadership and instruction in the alternative learning environment;
- use data and indicators to identify areas of strength and growth in ALPS; and
- expand collective efficacy efforts across alternative schools in North Carolina.

Early College Network

Composed of principals, counselors, college liaisons, and teachers from early college high schools, the **ECN** convenes regularly to share knowledge around common problems facing practitioners. The ECN differs from other networks in that schools are members, rather than individuals. Therefore, there are subnetworks within the ECN that involve individuals by role (i.e., principals, counselors, liaisons, and teachers). Subnetworks also exist for schools that are located within the same district or share a higher education partner. The network provides a venue for support, collaboration, sharing of best practices, and continuous improvement and innovation.

Early college high schools often have a unique school model with unique goals, distinct from other schools in their districts. The ECN aims to support these unique schools by increasing educator effectiveness through shared learning and peer support around common problems of practice. The ECN uses data to support network improvement and leverages the collective voice of the network to influence policy and practice. Because the ECN is large, the network structure includes an advisory council to ensure strong member voice in planning of network activities. In a recent survey,

- 100% of teacher members agreed that the ECN is a community of practice that is led by its members.
- 100% of teacher members agreed that the ECN has enhanced their personal and professional network beyond the formal convenings.
- 100% of teacher members agreed that, as members of the ECN, they feel a sense of collective advocacy and have influence over the early college environment.





Thank you for all you do! I really enjoy the breakout groups with counselors to discuss particular situations occurring so we can network and provide feedback and support for each other. Although we are counselors, we need that support as well to keep going each day!

ECN member, 2021



Defense STEM Education Consortium

Aligned to the Federal STEM Education Strategic Plan and funded by U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) STEM, **DSEC** is a collaborative partnership between academia, industry, not-for-profit organizations, and government that aims to broaden STEM literacy and develop a diverse and agile workforce with the technical excellence to defend our nation. By addressing and prioritizing critical STEM challenges, DoD is investing in evidence-based approaches to inspire and develop the nation's science and technology workforce. DSEC is led on behalf of DoD STEM by RTI International. This multiyear effort focuses on common priorities of national partners, including STEM enrichment programs for students and educators, STEM workforce engagement, program evaluation, and public outreach (www.dodstem.us). Last year, more than 20 partners within DSEC served over 100,000 students in all 50 states.





Conclusion: Networks Are an Integral Part of a Comprehensive Support System

RTI seeks to support lasting, positive change in education, and we see peer learning networks as a powerful tool in driving this change. When designed and facilitated well, peer learning networks provide a forum for the exchange of ideas, innovations, and solutions to address pressing challenges. RTI-supported networks are purposefully designed to connect changemakers, innovators, and forward thinkers who are passionate about improving education from the classroom to the board room, knowing that working together for change has a multiplier effect when compared to working for change in isolation. When used as part of a comprehensive support system, peer learning networks can serve as the web that connects us all in our mission to improve education and change lives.

At RTI, we understand and appreciate the power of networks to leverage collective expertise and resources to innovate and affect positive change in the complex landscape of public education. Please contact us if you would like to learn more about our work or any of the networks we facilitate.

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