Title: ASU’s Networked Cohorts: Forging Enduring Virtual Communities Among Teachers Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

Contact Information: Lisa Wyatt, Natalie Nailor, Brent Maddin, Lennon Audrain, Andrea Weinberg

Contact Email: Andrea.Weinberg@asu.edu

Topic: Teacher, Faculty, and Staff Well-Being, Professional Development, and Supports

Target audience: Prek-12 administrators, postsecondary

RESOURCES

- Landing Page Template
- Interactive Handout Template
- Sample Reflection questions
- JamBoard Template
- About Networked Cohorts video
INTRODUCTION

Reducing teacher isolation and expanding support networks will be vital to rebuilding school communities upon full, physical reopenings (Audrain et al., 2021). COVID-19 has exacerbated the demands on teachers, school leaders, and school systems alike. Recent studies confirm this, finding that a majority of teachers are working more than they did before the pandemic (77%) and enjoy teaching less (60%; Horace Mann, 2020). Principals described their work as “never-ending” and assumed more responsibility as “caregiver of all” teachers, staff, students, and families in their communities (Anderson et al., 2020). Additionally, school districts had a wide range of responses to the pandemic, from highly-responsive to “well-intentioned but fundamentally counterproductive,” depending on their pre-established resources and capacity (Hubbard et al., 2020).

Teaching has been described as a structurally isolating job (Lortie, 1975), and COVID-19 has only multiplied physical and social isolation for educators. However, teachers who felt more connected to a professional network during the COVID-19 pandemic are more likely to feel successful at meeting the needs of their students and less likely to express a desire to leave the profession (Balgopal et al., in review). These professional networks include university connections and supports, as well as connections to teachers within and across school sites (Balgopal et al., in review).

This submission describes the development, implementation, and future directions of Networked Cohorts, a full-year virtual professional development series offered to teams of teachers from across the central Arizona region, facilitated by the Next Education Workforce initiative Arizona State University. The goals of the series, and the ongoing monthly virtual sessions, are twofold (1) to promote the work of teams of educators as they explore instructional practices related to deeper and personalized learning for K-12 students, and (2) to establish a supportive community among teachers within and across collaborative teams.

THE NEXT EDUCATION WORKFORCE INITIATIVE

The Next Education Workforce (NEW) initiative at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College (MLFTC) at Arizona State University (ASU) has been working since 2018 to support the development of teams of educators with distributed expertise who can provide all students with deeper and personalized learning experiences. The NEW sees teaming as a structure for moving beyond a traditional classroom with a single teacher and one group of students, toward multiple educators delivering instruction to groups of students. This structure is believed to have benefits for teachers and students alike.

In Summer 2020, NEW offered teachers and administrators across the region a professional development to (1) introduce teachers to the concepts of deeper and personalized learning, (2) guide teachers through the development of teams, (3) design plans for how to enact and sustain the teaming structure, (4) engage teams in pre-planning, imagining team-based teacher roles with the aims to engage students in deeper and personalized learning experiences, and (5) creating roles and responsibilities for educators from the community.
Professional development support continued throughout the year, as NEW sought to provide support and a community for teachers experiencing various COVID-19 disruptions, called *Networked Cohorts*. This ongoing *Networked Cohorts* professional development, where teachers met regularly to learn together and support one another professionally and personally within and across teams — thus developing a community-of-communities — is the focus of this submission. Both the Summer 2020 NEW professional development and the *Networked Cohorts* of these are described in more detail below, and we offer examples as well as references to resources included as part of this submission.

**SUMMER 2020 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Before discussing the *Networked Cohorts* in detail, we will first describe the 5-day Next Education Workforce Summer 2020 Workshop that preceded the ongoing sessions. The Summer 2020 Training was a combination of asynchronous, self-paced modules and synchronous time for teams to collaborate with one another, facilitated by the professional development experience team. Through the asynchronous modules, participants were introduced to the fundamental tenets of the Next Education Workforce, including philosophies of deeper learning, personalized learning, and teaming which were foundational concepts carried through the *Networked Cohort* experience. The first self-paced module focused on the potential benefits of teacher collaboration and possible advantages of leveraging teams of educators. The module described educator teams as context dependent, emphasizing that they are flexible, varying in terms of size, roles (e.g., educators who are full-time versus part-time) and duration (e.g., entire year, specific units of study). The second module focused on the concepts of deeper learning and personalized learning. Participants delved into resources for understanding how to create clear, specific, dynamic, and challenging goals for individual students; how to differentiate the product, process, content, or learning environment for students; and how to weave more opportunities for student agency into their instructional repertoire. The final asynchronous module unpacked the role of educators from the community and their potential roles on teams. Interspersed throughout the self-paced modules were dedicated times for educators to operationalize the concepts they were learning into their local contexts. These asynchronous modules were coupled with daily synchronous sessions, described next.

During the synchronous sessions, participants explored their own unique expertise through individual and team-based activities, and each described how these areas of expertise (e.g., content, pedagogical content, and technological pedagogical content knowledge, skills, and dispositions) are assets to collaboration in teams. Finally, participants were given the opportunity to engage with content that introduced deeper learning and personalized learning, developing a foundational understanding of these concepts. Teachers investigated their own teaching practices in relation to deeper and personalized learning and contemplated the role of educators from the community and their potential roles in classrooms and on teams.

While the NEW Summer 2020 Training was designed to include some in-person experiences, the professional development team approximated learning experiences in a digital
delivery, primarily through Zoom and Canvas. There were over 700 participants from public and charter schools across Arizona. The participants were classroom teachers, mentor teachers, administrators, and those interested in learning more about NEW. Participants were paid $149 a day to attend the NEW Summer 2020 Training.

ABOUT NETWORKED COHORTS

At the conclusion of the Summer 2020 virtual workshop, the NEW began making plans to support the developing and emergent teacher teams throughout the school year. Networked Cohorts were conceived where teams would be supported as they transitioned from understanding foundational philosophies of personalized learning, deeper learning, and teaming to applying these in their instruction. Networked Cohorts are premised on the idea that a transition to non-traditional learning environments—including those presented by COVID-19—increasingly require educators to evolve collegially and collaboratively to work on teams (Campbell et al., 2013). The Networked Cohorts support teachers as they dive deeply into resources and approaches, making plans for bringing these ideas and practices back to their classrooms, implementing these plans, and returning to share, celebrate successes, and work through challenges.

In Networked Cohorts, school-based teams of teachers came together to a monthly Zoom meeting with other teams of teachers from across the central Arizona region. Recognizing the limited available time during the school day for educators from the same school—let alone other schools—to collaborate with one another, recurring Networked Cohorts session dates and times were established at the beginning of the 2020-21 school year. Each Networked Cohort session begins by reviewing norms for the learning space. These norms include keeping cameras on when possible, talking about students as if they, caregivers, and other community members were present, and reinforcing the time as space for personal care (see resources for an example). During each session, participants are given ample time to “resource dig,” or time to individually explore a resource before returning to discuss with their team or with other teams. Often, individuals will take time to collaborate with their team. Some of these collaborations include creating presentations to present to other teams. Finally, at the end of each Networked Cohorts session, participants reflect on their takeaways from the day.

IMPLEMENTING NETWORKED COHORTS

Teaming as a structure itself can support the development of robust Communities-of-Practice — if the groundwork is laid. A Community of Practice (CoP) is composed of individuals who engage in collective learning through sustained interactions among members (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Networked Cohorts served to create a nested Community-of-Practice among teams of individuals who worked together between Networked Cohort meetings. As such, Networked Cohorts provides educators with a space to share practices and ideas within their own team and across other teams.
The *Networked Cohorts* were composed of educators, grouped by grade band, who were brought together to explore instructional practices. Activities such as team-created presentations on an instructional practice they tried since the last session allowed educators and teams to learn from one another. In this way, *Networked Cohorts* sessions centered on practice. Educators actively developed shared experiences, stories, tools, and language to discuss their instructional practice through team-work time, resource digs, and from listening to other team’s presentations. *Networked Cohorts* allowed them to engage in certain actions, value specific experiences, and to make certain choices related to tenants of NEW; in particular, distributing expertise among a team of educators and deepening and personalizing learning for students. These recurring sessions toward a common goal situate *Networked Cohorts* as a complex system of professional learning for educators, as opposed conceptualizing professional development being a singular event (Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

Recurring meetings also enabled sustained engagement in practice (Wenger, 1998), and the development of a shared language and shared repertoire among the educators and teams. Since the structure of each team at each school is context dependent, recurring sessions enabled educators to contextually interpret the curricular and instructional decisions educators from other sites were making. *Networked Cohorts* allowed teams attending the same series to recognize and co-create histories, artifacts, actions, and a shared language. In *Networked Cohorts* sessions, educators learn from one another about various resources (e.g., LearningforJustice.org), share the work happening at their local school sites, and have time to collaborate and plan with their team and with other teams. Since the structure of each team at each school is context dependent, recurring sessions enabled educators to develop an understanding of the curricular and instructional decisions educators from other sites were making.

**ABOUT PARTICIPANTS**

225 educators participated in *Networked Cohorts* during the 2020-21 school year. These individuals composed 49 teams from 22 different schools.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

Preliminary findings from *Networked Cohorts* revealed two promising practices that can be replicated and adapted as schools begin to reopen. First, sustained virtual communities, such as *Networked Cohorts*, have the potential to promote the work of teams of educators while they explore instructional practices — including, but not limited to those intended to offer deeper learning and personalized learning for students. Second, *Networked Cohorts* have the potential to reduce educators’ structural isolation that has been exacerbated by the pandemic where remote learning and social distancing have only multiplied physical and social isolation.

*Networked Cohort* sessions had sustained high attendance rates, with a participant attendance rate of 75%. Further, participants were highly engaged as they explored novel instructional practices in the context of their own instructional practice and the instructional practices of their team. In fact, those who engaged in *Networked Cohorts* self-reported
statistically significant increases in deeper learning and personalized learning practices. Artifacts, such as JamBoards (see resources) reaffirmed the exploration and implementation of novel instructional practices.

*Networked Cohorts* was implemented in coordination with multiple urban and suburban schools across Arizona. Teams that participated in *Networked Cohorts* also self-reported statistically significant increases in their team culture. As prior research indicates, teachers who are more connected are more likely to feel successful at meeting the needs of their students and less likely to express a desire to leave the profession (Balgopal et al., in review).

As a result of these promising preliminary findings from *Networked Cohorts*, NEW has planned to continue hosting these sessions in this upcoming 2021-22 school year. *Networked Cohorts* is not an initiative that universities typically undertake, however. NEW and ASU are committed to the surrounding community of teachers, some of whom attended ASU for their teacher preparation. As Goodlad (1988) notes, “the close coupling of schools and universities is of critical importance in getting the kinds of schools and teachers we need” (p. 77). Robust university-school connections during the COVID-19 pandemic are associated with heightened feelings of success by teachers (Balgopal et al., in review), and surely *Networked Cohorts* is a viable structure that will strengthen teachers’ capacities, enabling them to feel more connected to a professional network during the COVID-19 pandemic. This holds immense potential to accelerate the return to safe in-person teaching and learning as schools begin to reopen.

As uncertainty regarding K-12 schools physical openings continues, the NEW team-based approach to instruction has the potential to mitigate the impacts of some educators being in person and some being online. During the 2020-21 school year, teachers could still coordinate and collaborate via *Networked Cohorts*, enabling students to return to in-person while teachers who were immunocompromised could stay home. The shortage of qualified teachers willing to teach was already dire in Arizona prior to the pandemic (Audrain et al., 2021). While the ultimate aim of *Networked Cohorts* was not to reduce the impact on the profession, it was certainly an unintended benefit to working and workplace conditions for teachers (Pressley, 2021). *Networked Cohorts* are a practical structure that empowered educators to utilize the expertise of a team of educators while increasing teacher coordination and collaboration to deliver deeper learning and personalized learning experiences to students (Audrain et al., 2021). Thus, ongoing professional development activities that focus on instructional practice, forge university-teacher relationships, and strengthen relationships among teams of teachers can support the development of robust and resilient teams of teachers who are equipped to accelerate the return to safe and high-quality in-person teaching and learning.

**FOCUS ON EQUITY**

*Networked Cohorts* had a focus on engaging educators in reflecting about equitable practices and resources for students from historically marginalized and underserved populations. For example, educators were able to compile resources from various equity-minded organizations such as Learning For Justice. Educators who participated in *Networked Cohorts* self-reported improvements in ability related to honoring and including multiple perspectives, to
identifying potential bias, and to initiating and supporting constructive conversations about identities (e.g., race, culture, ethnicity) in their classrooms (Olofson et al., 2018). This is promising evidence as the demographics of students in Arizona continues to be more minority than White, and as educators and communities alike look to higher and K-12 education to offer more equitable opportunities for students.
References

[https://repository.upenn.edu/cpre_policybriefs/92](https://repository.upenn.edu/cpre_policybriefs/92)


