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The Power of Collective Leadership for Learning

Suzanne Cridge

Introduction

In 2013, Social Ventures Australia (SVA) launched The Bright Spots Schools Connection (The Connection), a collaborative, connected network designed to engage school leaders in collective learning within, and across, their school communities. In 2019, The Connection is a thriving network of leaders that represent 50 schools from across Australia, all serving the education needs of challenged communities with low socio-economic indicators.

The power and influence of effective school leadership is an underestimated leverage point of system transformation and change to build quality learning and school improvement. This chapter will explore the opportunity provided by collaborative networked learning, the power of what can be achieved and the impact that emerges when the principles of leading for learning are enacted in a network model where the expertise

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T. Townsend (ed.), *Instructional Leadership and Leadership for Learning in Schools*,
Palgrave Studies on Leadership and Learning in Teacher Education,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-23736-3_14

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of the individual becomes the expertise of the collective. This model of leadership support and collaboration is catalytic in building education impact and improvement, as everyone is a learner, everyone has a role to play and value to add. Drawing on the experience and insights of participating school leaders and their teams, this narrative will propose refined ways of building the ecosystem necessary to support powerful school leadership. These ideas will be discussed in more detail.

Education and School Leadership: The Opportunity and the Challenge

Knowledge today is more pervasively available than ever before. It can be readily accessed by most with advances in technology and is no longer the domain of some or just a few. Both knowledge and information are exchanged in ways and at rates which were almost unimaginable even a decade ago. The accessibility of knowledge, however, does not guarantee that it gets to where it can be used or mobilised for action to create systems' impact. Education knowledge, although readily available, also needs mobilising within and across systems. It relies on translation into the nuanced actions necessary to deliver the learning improvements within communities where it matters most, and where education systems need it to be, to achieve the maximum desired impact.

Knowledge is also empowering. As knowledge and the mobilisation of knowledge increases, traditional system hierarchies of knowledge management, where knowledge has been less mobile, become less relevant and potentially less effective.

Knowledge is now being shared and exchanged in more accessible and dynamic ways. This phenomenon has the potential to inform and empower education practitioners and leaders, both more efficiently and effectively, to move to action. The challenge, and the opportunity, is to get this growing knowledge resource to the practitioners and leaders, where it can be put into action efficiently across systems. There are also risks in ensuring the consistency of the standards of quality of that knowledge, so increasing the accessibility of quality knowledge needs to be

intentionally managed, creating the best-leveraged opportunities, in ways where it cannot be ignored. We need to design with intention mechanisms in systems to make this happen and not leave it to chance.

The good news is that quality educational leadership knowledge, expertise and practice exists as a largely untapped resource in education systems. Highly effective school leaders are building new knowledge and understanding of what works within this complex ecosystem in everyday practice. However, this knowledge often lies randomly located within, and stubbornly stuck and stranded in, pockets of expertise across traditional systems. How can education systems find, connect and enable this invaluable and largely untapped resource, one that might raise quality levels across the system?

The role of educational leadership as a mobilising mechanism for building capacity is a fundamental and important consideration in resolving complex education challenges. Growing complexity in education ecosystems requires a strategic move to a devolved, action-based approach to leadership, supported with explicit and shared responsibilities and accountabilities. There is an opportunity to evolve, enable and empower education leadership knowledge and practices at the school level by mobilising people and technology. The intentional design of a coordinated system-wide response to persistent challenges and wickedly entrenched issues is an important action for creating a more accessible and equitable Australian education system.

Complex problems cannot be solved with silver bullet solutions. The obstacles and stumbling blocks encountered in the evolving journey of education systems are rarely simply addressed. As mentioned, there is, however, an enormous amount of leadership expertise, knowledge and insight that sits within the education ecosystem, across multiple contexts, waiting to be connected and mobilised to create aligned responsive actions. This new and growing opportunity can develop mechanisms and structures to unleash, empower and align this asset of systems' leadership capacity and then direct it to create the targeted actions needed to deliver new learning momentum and improvements. This essentially is profession-led education action, aligned and directed at the school level where the real work is delivered to create the conditions for learning. It could be argued that this is systems-based leadership for learning.

It is a time-sensitive challenge to explore what different paradigms of school leadership might bring to the conversation and what actions might exist for creating new value in a complex system. What is more fundamental to these bigger questions confronting education systems globally, is to consider the subsidiary questions, namely what leadership approaches and styles are still relevant, and what needs to change to respond to these changing and evolving conditions. For many in education practice at the school level, it sometimes feels that they are building the plane and flying it at the same time, and so arises the issue of what is most important. Where should school leaders start? Some would certainly suggest that instructional leadership is critical, and for others, it is leading for learning that is more important. But perhaps, is it something completely different, such as hybrid blends of a number of approaches?

This chapter will focus on the enabling conditions for school leadership practices that are relevant to emerging shifts in education systems. Perhaps it is how we build collaborative insights, informed by evidence of what works, to connect the expertise and knowledge that matters most. Networked collaborative leadership support creates these conditions and is a powerful emerging mechanism to create collective efficacy for the catalytic actions necessary for systems' impact. Progress in education is no longer about exclusively adopting only one type of leadership approach, but the opportunity to create conditions for the marriage of specific actions and shared learning to create the perfect storm for learning impact.

In any given school or system context, we need to create the best learning opportunities for young people to progress successfully through learning at school. Of critical importance then, is how educational leaders are best supported to build those contextually aligned and nuanced conditions to achieve success within the schools situated in the complex communities they lead. Put simply, how can education systems best support school leaders to connect their knowledge and expertise to deliver greater impact for learning? How can the actions of growing knowledge and expertise be best shared across systems to inform and support all leaders in ways that will build systems leadership capacity effectively and provide the momentum for new systems action?

Networked Leadership for Learning

Education is a complex human interaction. Education and school leadership on every level are both very human responsibilities. As our community evolves, more sophisticated human interactions and ways of knowing, sharing and learning together, and the degree of complexity for the needs within the education ecosystem, also increase. The importance and necessity of great leadership in this changing context is, broadly speaking, an uncontested premise.

Leadership can be an isolating responsibility in schools when there are limited mechanisms to connect with like-minded professionals grappling with similar challenges and decisions to be made. Education systems, traditionally, have been set up in transactional hierarchies where accountabilities and responsibilities to deliver are clear, but in reality, the nature of the journey to deliver varies and is context specific. Professional leadership in this climate does not come with an instructional handbook. School leaders are essentially the directors of their leadership and learning journey. It is not possible that one leader or even a small group of leaders in a school could have all the knowledge and experience they need to respond to rapidly changing learning contexts, challenges and opportunities. System support for leaders needs to become more efficient to be more effective.

The complexities of leading learning in school communities are challenging, but knowledge and expertise are pervasive across systems. The opportunity provided by the convening of collaborative networking for school leaders is that it connects them to the necessary knowledge, at their point of need, in both highly effective and efficient ways. It also has the potential to embed the practice in effective sustainable ways. Collaborative leadership networks provide a catalytic professional connection where the resources of expertise, knowledge and learning are collected and exchanged for the improvement of the collective. Access to additional and new knowledge is empowering; it can also be very affirming. The value of the collective wisdom of leaders working across contexts builds whole systems' capacity and efficacy.

Louise Stoll (2015) declared that collaboration is the name of the game, proposing that it is a smart and logical move for schools to pool their expertise to develop actions that best respond to need. In England, for example, schools at least are expected to work together to create what Stoll refers to as a 'self-improving system'. School-to-school support and peer-to-peer learning are identified as important actions to raise standards and improve the quality of teaching and learning. Stoll also refers to the 2013 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Teaching and Learning International Study (TALIS) (OECD, 2018a) that highlights the importance of professional collaborations, suggesting that the most successful countries and jurisdictions that have continued to improve consistently include opportunities for peers to work together.

In Australia, the Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools: Through Growth to Achievement, produced by a panel chaired by David Gonski on behalf of the Australian Government (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018), provides the view that school leadership support is a priority action. Review recommendation 20 specifically refers to the importance of supporting school leaders and enabling them to share their expertise with one another. Sharing expertise and knowledge productively does not, however, happen without process, intention and purpose.

Networked inquiry developed by Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser is another example of how the expertise of a collaborative network can be captured and directed with rigour and intention. Halbert and Kaser (2016) see collaboration as a fundamental systems-transformation practice. Originating in British Columbia, Canada, their model, based on inquiry, develops collaborative practices with intention, by connecting the moral purpose of the work and the strong inquiry mindsets of school leaders with a powerful equity and quality agenda. This Spirals of Inquiry (Halbert & Kaser, 2016) methodology is a powerful tool that has been embraced by many of the Social Ventures Australia Connection schools to guide and provide structure to their learning in shared collaborative practices across the network.

The purposes of networked collaboration for schools are to produce better learning outcomes, to become more effective and efficient in their

work and to build the conditions for success collectively. The shift to a collaborative professional team practice in schools and classrooms has not emerged by accident but is driven by need and has a clear purpose. Humans work better together. Living in communities is an evolutionary fact that has provided a long history of benefits to the human race for thousands of years; collective efficacy is not a new phenomenon.

Collaborative professionalism is a notion described by both Hargreaves, et al. and Fullan in their separate publications on *Leading from the Middle* (Fullan, 2015; Hargreaves, Shirley, Wangia, Bacon, & D'Angelo, 2018). They describe the value of solving growing education complexities through collaborative professional relationships, such as those being exemplified in the high-performing Canadian education jurisdiction of Ontario. According to both Fullan and Hargreaves, the notion of 'collaborative professionalism' in education practice typically features effective feedback, and rigorous professional dialogue guided by processes and protocols.

The premise of collaborative professionalism described by Hargreaves et al. (2018) moves professional dialogue towards developing learning for meaning and purpose, in contrast to focusing on primarily narrow achievement goals. It also builds an embedded culture where educators are the professional experts and recognised as such. Professional judgments, however, are built through collaborative inquiry. Leaders share collective responsibilities for both delivery and the outcomes that create the impact gains for the school in which they operate. This shift is not a 'hands-off' approach from the government but a guiding and empowerment role for systems to play.

Middle leaders generating action together is identified as a core element of the Ontario education strategy in the *Leading from the Middle* initiative (Fullan, 2015; Hargreaves et al., 2018). Education system change occurs when school practices are impacted. In Ontario, Hargreaves and Fullan describe the opportunity for responsive new policy and leadership in education as a devolved leadership model where hierarchy has less relevance and a self-improving system becomes the priority focus.

Accomplished and successful school leaders are resourceful, creative and strategic. It takes a rare leadership talent, however, to deal with the complexities of the contemporary leadership responsibilities in schools in isolation. Connecting the collective leadership talents across schools to

build systems' efficacy provides improvement leverage points for education systems in multiple dimensions of practice.

The value of collaborative action within systems cannot be underestimated. If we think of ecosystems being the sum of community actions, and the community actions as the sum of all actions collectively, then systems change is quite a random process. On the other hand, if we can activate collaborative leadership action within an ecosystem, the opportunity to cut through the complex multi-layers of community actions to support the spread of high-impact action more efficiently becomes possible. It cuts through the system's 'noise' to reduce distractions. This concept can be represented simply in Fig. 14.1.

Moving collaboratively in delivering action provides the opportunity to create intentional climates of shared motivation with a clear moral purpose to drive action. Collaborative action promotes a notion of shared appetite for collective efficacy and impact that can cut through complexity to transform and improve systems.

Convening the 'right people' to build trust and culture cannot be underestimated as a necessary precondition for success where sharing and pooling knowledge and expertise is a necessary feature (Erllichman, Sawyer, & Spencer, 2018). Investment in due diligence to identify the right contributors is astute and critical.

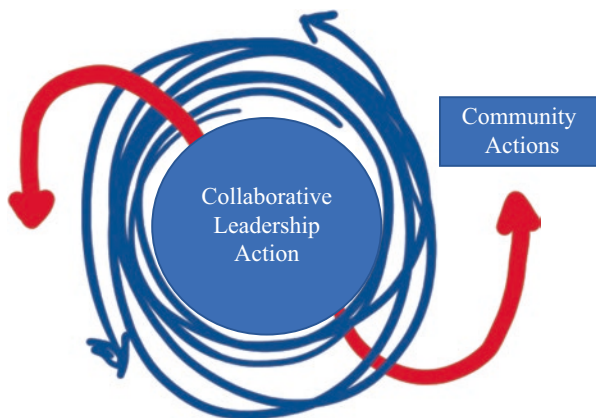


Fig. 14.1 Collaborative action cuts through complexity

Creating the conditions for successful collaboration also requires significant cultural shifts in systems. In the not-for-profit social sector, collaborative networking has been emerging over the last decade as an opportunity to drive stronger outcomes. Jane Wei-Skillern and Nora Silver suggest that there are mindset shifts that are counterintuitive principles for success in collaborative network design (Wei-Skillern & Silver, 2013). These shifts are outlined as moving:

From	To
Focus on growth	Focus on mission
Focus on control	Focus on trust
Focus on yourself	Focus on others
Focus on garnering resources	Focus on sharing resources
Focus on the particular—bright stars	Focus on the whole—building constellations

Wei-Skillern and Silver (2013)

As complexity in education grows, it provides the rationale for thinking differently and creatively. Participation rates and retention in both formal and informal Australian education systems continue to grow yet equity and achievement gaps remain stubbornly entrenched (OECD, 2018b). Both the opportunities and the challenges continue to coexist despite significant financial and resource investment into Australian education systems. There are clearly both big opportunities for improvement and competing challenges to be overcome.

The notion of increasing complexity provides a good place from where to develop to this important conversation, as it is fundamental to the challenges of delivering learning improvement and greater impact within systems of education. Core to the conversation are the following questions:

- What are the leadership actions that will develop new thinking and create deeper understanding?
- Where are the best opportunities for evolving school leadership practices?
- What is the potential for the new design of structural mechanisms to support and grow improved education and school leadership for greater impact?

- Is it enough to think about developing school leaders' capacity as individuals within schools or should we be moving towards building the capacity of Leading for Learning into systems' leadership frames?
- And if so, what does that look like in practical terms for school leaders?
- Can systems be organised more effectively to support and develop great school leadership?

The logical place to start is where action for impact happens, at the school level, posing the question: what can we learn from successful school leaders? This question leads to the work of Social Ventures Australia and their attempts to build a network that will enable school leaders to do their job effectively and efficiently to deliver great learning.

Social Ventures Australia

In 2013, Social Ventures Australia launched a consultative process to better understand the education equity context in Australian schools. The process uncovered interesting practical insights with data collected from practising school leaders. A shared concern expressed by the school leaders was that school leadership practices in Australia were generally disconnected. There were new initiatives being shared with school leaders but they were not always perceived as aligned to a real need. Practitioner school leaders reported feelings of professional isolation and were even constrained in their professional learning opportunities to learn from and with each other.

The schools consulted in 2013 rarely worked collaboratively and demonstrated few consistently maintained and ongoing professional relationships with other schools, other than those consistently described as superficially meeting the requirements of systems, such as local area meetings. Some professional learning and support were reported as being self-managed and identified, but it was often ad hoc and much of it was directed and dominated with high-level, broad system priorities. Much was identified as imposed or 'top-down' and therefore not always deeply contextually aligned to local needs. There appeared to be little filtering or even consistency of knowledge and expertise sharing applied, particularly

within and across disadvantaged school contexts. Checking in with colleagues across schools with the explicit intention and for the purpose of sharing learning and expertise exchange was randomly organised. There was no evidence reported of practitioner ongoing collaboration across Australian states.

There was also little differentiation of professional learning strategies identified by schools, given the range of contexts and the different and similar challenges identified. Many school leaders reported feelings of isolation, stress, challenge, frustration and concern which was exacerbated with the added complexities of those schools located in disadvantaged and challenged communities. The perception was that they worked in isolation despite being part of a bigger system of practice.

High-impact education practices, expertise and knowledge did exist but sat within these isolated pockets within education systems. Quality school leadership was identified as a driver for both developing and delivering the impact observed in the schools that were identified as doing well. The problem seemed to be that this important leadership knowledge and expertise was only shared with other schools and across systems by chance and not necessarily by design. Understanding this dynamic provided both a new opportunity and a new challenge to consider.

The commitment from SVA was to create the actions and mechanisms needed to connect and unleash the expertise and knowledge of powerful educational leadership for growing learning impact so that it could become pervasive practice. School leadership was identified as an untapped leverage point for improving learning, particularly in challenged school communities. School leaders can either enable great teaching and learning, or disable it, through decisions made on the basis of their knowledge and expertise in any given context. This is a huge responsibility. If high-quality teaching and learning is the non-negotiable of a high-performing system, then building school leadership capacity is a critical opportunity to explore opportunities for greater system-level impact.

Successful school leaders hold considerable expertise and knowledge about how to create the conditions to impact student learning and improve outcomes. The schools led by successful leaders are the hotspots

of leadership knowledge and expertise and are significant assets to education systems. New questions emerged:

- Could this expertise be connected and mobilised to build greater capacity?
- What are the mechanisms that are necessary for school leaders to collaboratively share their experiences efficiently and effectively, to both build and bolster school leadership capacity within and across systems collectively?

Through these questions, a new premise also emerged, that of collective expertise generated by a collaborative network design for school leaders, which has the potential to become a catalytic influence as a model for systems change. Collaborative leadership network designs have the potential to embed and sustain actions for increased systems capacity development, through building the high-impact practices across more schools within the system.

Building a Collaborative Leadership Design Network in Practice: The Bright Spots Schools Connection

What Is a Collaborative Network?

For purposes of this discussion, a collaborative leadership network is a community alliance defined by the following design attributes:

- A shared common moral purpose;
- An aligned commitment to action;
- Voluntary inclusive participation with a flat hierarchy of shared leadership;
- A willingness to share and exchange expertise;
- Collective and mutual responsibility and accountability for shared success and impact; and
- Respectful relationships in a culture of trust and goodwill.

It is not a Community of Practice or a Professional Learning Community in the traditional sense, but these complementary structures may flourish within a Collaborative Leadership Design Network (in future called a CLDN), by creating the targeted response to a particular focus area as may be identified within the collaborative network.

The Bright Spots Schools Connection (in future called The Connection) is a model of a 'for purpose and convened, collaborative network community'. The Connection is an initiative created by Social Ventures Australia (SVA) that supports exceptional school leaders in disadvantaged schools to connect and improve the learning outcomes of students collectively.

The Connection is a tiered collaborative leadership network of 50 Australian selected schools representing three Australian states and approximately 2900 educators in a community of 30,000 student learners in 2018 and approximately 50,000 student learners across 5 years (Social Ventures Australia, 2018). Each school serves a community with a socio-demographic rating either on, or below, the average Australian Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) scale of 1000 (Australian Assessment and Curriculum Reporting Authority, 2011). There are four key objectives of the CLDN of The Connection. They are as follows:

- Identify successful practices in schools serving disadvantaged communities;
- Build the capacity and mobilise the knowledge and expertise of school leaders through modelling, coaching and exchanges of knowledge and understanding;
- Spread evidence-informed practices through exposure to new thinking and developments in new practices to improve student learning; and
- Influence the education landscape, building the system capacity to deliver impact for disadvantaged communities where it might be needed most.

The overarching goal of The Connection is to improve the student learning outcomes of participating schools. It aims to do this by bringing the schools together and sharing new educational ideas and evidence, so that the schools will apply new effective practices, build effective partnerships and increase their capacity to implement school improvement, thereby improving the school's teaching and learning environment.

The Connection initiative is built around a Programme Logic framework (see Fig. 14.2). It is a strengths-based design and starts with identifying a combination of both successful mature and emerging schools demonstrating actions placing them on the improvement journey continuum. It then connects the leaders of these schools through convening and tiered networking activities which are designed to build and connect the knowledge and expertise of each group of school leaders. The model promotes a distributed leadership approach by engaging a minimum of three or more school leaders from each school in these tiered interaction opportunities. The goal of the activities and interactions is to create an exchange and inform an evidence base of what practices and action contribute to achieving maximum impacts for education success.

The next two figures demonstrate the models for action, with Fig. 14.3 providing an overview of how collaboration is leveraged to support action.

Figure 14.4 identifies the core features of the Collaborative Leadership Network Design.

The school leadership teams are invited to participate in the network voluntarily after a rigorous screening and a due diligence process that informs the selection of participants. School leadership teams make an investment to participate based on the role that they play in the group. The investment cost is offset by contributions from both the sponsoring state education systems and philanthropy. The state-based systems share responsibility for the selection of the school leadership teams that are invited to participate. State systems leverage the opportunity to develop the capacity of targeted school leaders in schools as systems influencers. The actions of the supported school leaders also build the momentum for developing learning improvement from within the system itself, essentially embedding actions to grow 'self-improving' systems.

In addition to the convened interactions, each school develops a Project Action Plan (PAP) which identifies a strategic improvement

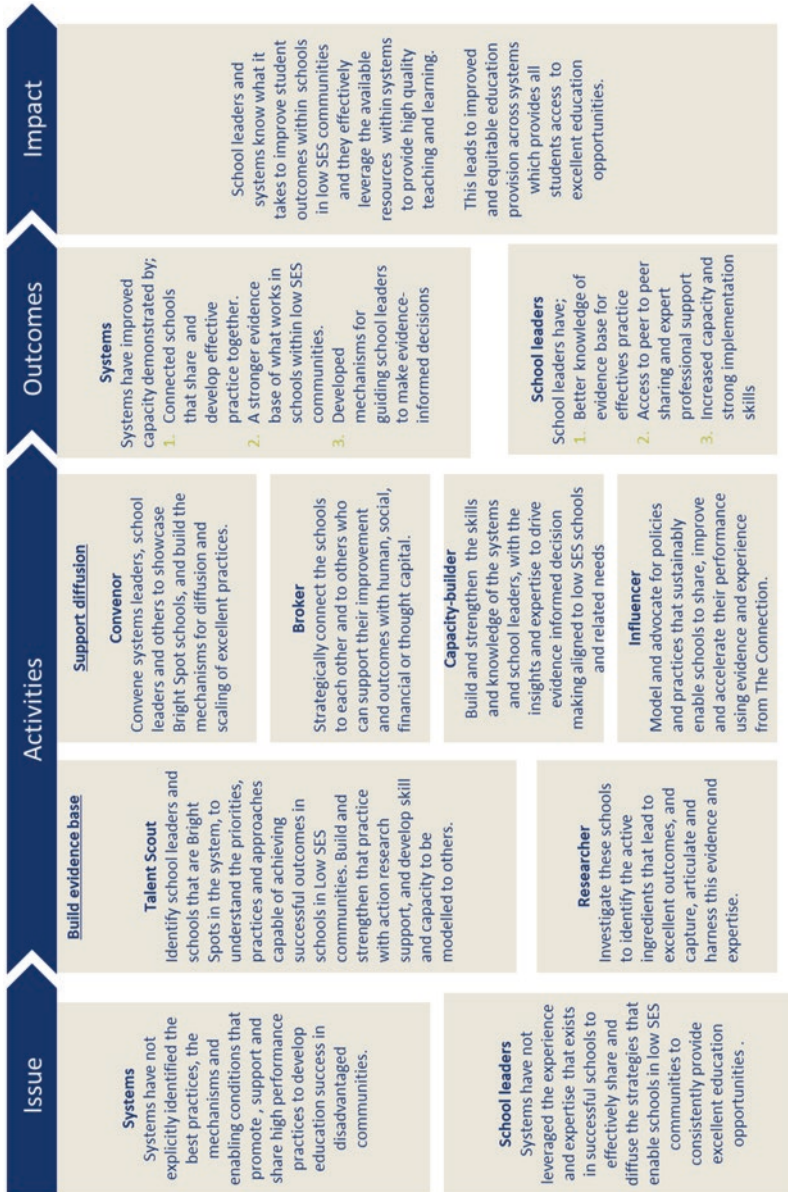


Fig. 14.2 Programme Logic Frame Bright Spots Schools Connection, Social Ventures Australia

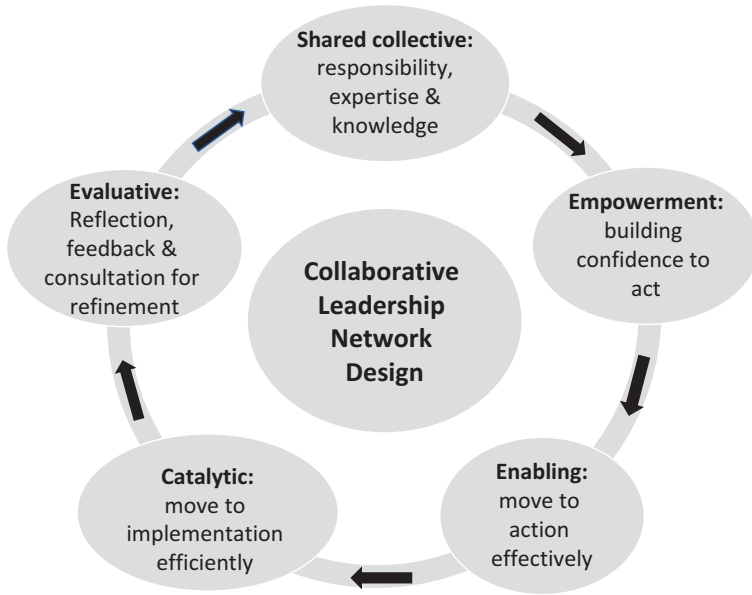


Fig. 14.3 Leveraging the cycle of collaboration for action

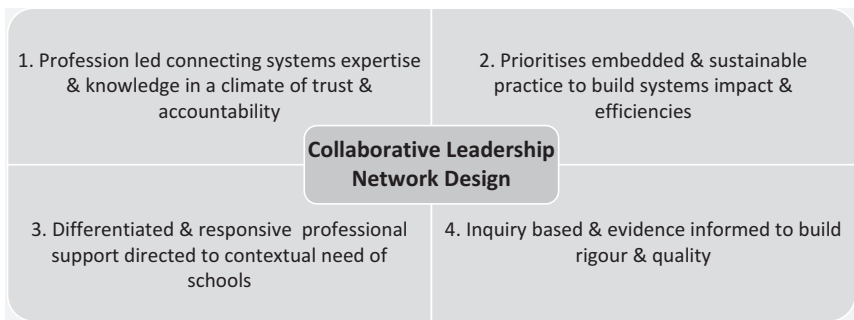


Fig. 14.4 Core features of CLDN

action of focus and priority for their engagement in the Connection network. The PAP is designed for a 3–5-year interaction and is in every case an embedded part of the school’s strategic plan. The Connection school PAPs are context specific to each school, although there are shared identified themes across the cohort. Each plan is rigorously built around a

Programme Logic frame with monitoring and evaluation of progress with actions, outcomes and identified success measures. The shared processes of developing and implementing PAPs provide an important language and focus for the network interactions and underpin the many cultural elements of the networked collaborations which build the important underpinning relationships. The PAPs also provide both a mechanism and a purpose for the currencies of professional knowledge and expertise to be traded and shared around and within the collaborative network.

Table 14.1 Summary of SVA connection activities

SVA connection collaborative network convened activities & interactions

Thought Leadership Gatherings

Two-day national gatherings of the network cohort of leaders (up to three leaders from each school) held four times a year for all Connection schools. They are designed to challenge and to enable reflection and exploration of both existing and new practices.

Hub days

Collaboratively designed professional learning and exchange sessions held four times a year for each state group cohort of school leaders (up to three leaders from each school) as well as a target STEM specialist group of schools. The hub days are smaller state-based groups and are tailored to local and group priorities.

School visits

Coordinated, full-day school visits hosted by a Connection school leadership team. These take place on the day after Thought Leadership Gatherings four times a year. School visits are designed to observe schools in practice and provide feedback and opportunity for shared learning for leadership teams.

Direct support from SVA Convenor

Visits to schools by the SVA Convenor to provide tailored professional support on request for Project Action Plans. Engagement support visits are provided at a minimum of two to four times a year for each network school or cluster. These visits are conducted to provide tailored support to the school leadership team in the implementation of Project Action Plans.

Connection international explorations

International investigations of education practices in other countries conducted annually since 2017. International experiences are provided for school leaders to build insights, expertise and expand networks of influence.

Additional activities by design and request

These are activities that are delivered and aligned to emerging opportunities or new activities supported upon request. They might include hosting a visiting education expert, supporting a Teach Meet professional convening or developing a twilight professional learning opportunity.

The activities provided to engage the school leaders in professional interactions are presented within a tiered approach starting at the school level graduating up to the national aligned focus areas (see Table 14.1). They are mostly co-designed and aligned to identify the needs of the collaborative network. All activities delivered are evaluated against engagement levels and feedback is collected from participants to then inform the design of new activities and to gauge the quality of the experiences and interactions. Every convened activity provided is optional and invitational which honours the professional expertise and judgements that each school leader brings to the collaboration relationship. It also provides differentiation of the experience which is necessary to ensure the engagement in activities efficiently respond more appropriately to the many diverse contextual nuanced needs across the collaborative networked group. The collaborative school leadership network is a hotspot of creative and rigorous professional practice.

The activities are delivered across three states (Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales) in both school-based and alternative capital city locations within Australia. The Connection collaborative leadership network has engaged a growing number of ‘experts’ from within and outside education circles who have contributed to the learning of the participating school leaders. Many have remained critical friends of the collaborative networked group, providing access to additional support and social capital for the school leaders. The school leaders indicate that the networked relationships have offered significant value to their engagement with The Connection community and with each other. The group of critical friends include academic experts, industry experts, philanthropic partners and education system leaders at all levels, creating access to a broader resource of expertise for the school leaders to draw from to inform their leadership actions and decisions.

Measuring The Connection Impact

The emerging impact of The Connection design to date is described in two parts but is not fully complete or exhaustive. The evaluation of this work is current and ongoing.

The first section describes, in summary, the impact of eight Powerhouse schools after 4 years' participation in The Connection collaborative network design. The second section describes, in summary, the impact of the participation of The Connection Hub schools in two groups after 1 year in The Connection collaborative network design. The two evaluations referred to include (a) the 2016 Pilot Evaluation of 18 schools participating for 1 year from three Australian states, Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales; and (b) the first year Progress Report 2017 of a 3-year evaluation for an expanded Hub group representing 24 schools from the school cohort including representation from all three states, and also including the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)-focused group of Hub schools added in 2017. These evaluations were completed by Social Ventures Australia Consulting, a group independent of the Social Ventures Australia Education team.

Powerhouse Schools Impact Study

Background

In 2014, SVA commenced The Connection with the selection of eight Powerhouse schools. These Powerhouse schools were identified from a referred list of 84 schools as being schools that had demonstrated significant impact in the development of student learning outcomes. This Powerhouse school cohort of leaders initiated the work of the CLDN of The Connection. The following summary has been adapted from the final evaluation report produced by the Australian Council Education Research (ACER) (2018).

The focus of the evaluation was to test The Connection's Theory of Change with an emphasis on understanding what competencies and capabilities are required of Powerhouse school leaders to be successful. The three areas of interest were as follows:

- *To identify what might be some of the 'unique' or 'special' competencies and capabilities of effective school leaders;*
- *To see if, through participating in The Connection collaborative design, such school leaders would further develop their leadership competencies and capabilities; and*

- *To see whether these competencies and capabilities are capable of being imparted to other school leaders.*

Methodologies used to collect data points informing the evaluation included three online surveys, three face-to-face interviews with school leaders at each school site, including leaders at all school levels, classroom teachers and two representative case study narratives.

What was the impact after 4 years of collaborative networked leadership support?

The ACER evaluation was able to confirm that each of the eight Powerhouse school principal leaders demonstrated the following eight competencies and capabilities:

- *An unwavering belief that all students deserve the right to quality educational outcomes, and that all students can, and will, succeed;*
- *A deep, and continually developing, knowledge and understanding of the curriculum (including research, developments in pedagogy, assessment and student wellbeing);*
- *Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills to lead and mediate change (including evidence of optimism; enthusiasm; confidence; perseverance; resilience; open-mindedness; willingness to learn; personal reflection);*
- *An ability to take responsibility for developing a culture of effective teaching and learning;*
- *An ability to build trust and collegiality with teachers and community;*
- *An ability to work with others to produce and implement evidence-informed improvement plans;*
- *An ability to develop their own professional learning and skills and to encourage their staff to develop their professional learning and skills; and*
- *An ability to engage and work with the wider community to build partnerships.*

The evaluation also found that participation in The Connection collaborative network design allowed the eight Powerhouse school principal leaders to develop and refine their leadership competencies and capabilities as outlined.

The Powerhouse school leaders demonstrated agility, creativity and integrity in their leadership. The learning journeys were shared in case study formats and provided a small snapshot of the experience of leading

in complex educational contexts. The narratives suggest no one clear strategy for action but a blended approach designed with an intentional purpose in response to the identified needs. The specific case study details of the activities of Powerhouse schools and their impact on student learning can be found in the report (ACER, 2018).

The Impact of the Connection Collaborative Network for Powerhouse Schools

The impact of The Connection on Powerhouse schools was assessed as ‘significant’, ‘positive’, ‘major’, ‘pivotal’ (Australian Council of Education Research, 2018). Powerhouse school principals believe that the impact of The Connection on their schools’ work is considerable, transforming and long-term. The schools involved in The Connection expressed that they were privileged to be part of an important initiative. School leaders agreed that The Connection provided the impetus—‘the catalyst’—for changes their schools needed. The Connection affects, in a positive way, the overall teaching and learning environment in their schools. Principals reported changes they observed in staff who participate in the school’s Bright Spots project. They witnessed ‘increased teachers’ capacity and understanding’. Participation in The Connection led principals, school leaders and teachers to change their thinking and behaviour; this is perhaps the strongest indication that the impact of The Connection was indeed significant and that The Connection on Powerhouse schools was likely to be long-term.

The Connection’s model of supporting schools to design and undertake a project of significance in their school provides a valuable model to promote long-term systemic change. The Bright Spots Schools Connection Powerhouse schools project was assessed as being an important initiative.

The Connection was given a strong endorsement by the Powerhouse school leaders stating that they would encourage other schools to participate in similar initiatives in the future. The Powerhouse school principal leaders value the networks that they have made with other schools, and do not underestimate what they have learned, and continue to learn, from the collaborative networked experience. One Powerhouse school

leader stated, *'The Connection is having a huge impact. We would not be where we are now without it'* (ACER, 2018).

Connection Hub Schools Evaluation

Pilot Evaluation 2016 of the Star Hubs Initiative: Connection Collaborative Network Model.

In 2015 and 2016, The Connection collaborative network was expanded with an additional 18 schools to test the design and gauge the outcomes of hub-based professional collaboration within the network. Each of the additional schools was selected based on an analysis of National Assessment of Progress in Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) trend data (Australian Curriculum Reporting Authority, 2016), the socio-economic demographic rating of the school—ICSEA (Australian Assessment and Curriculum Reporting Authority, 2011), and responses and performance characteristics compared to the National School Improvement Tool (Masters, 2012). These schools all demonstrated promise to become emerging Powerhouse influencers in their respective state systems.

The group of 18 schools included 13 primary schools and 5 secondary schools from three Australian states: Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales. The evaluation was conducted (Social Ventures Consulting, 2016) to investigate the potential to scale up the work of the Connection to increase impact and value. The methodology included a mix of aligned surveys and interviews with school leaders and teachers, asking them to reflect on the changes at their school that occurred as a result of their participation over the 12 months.

Table 14.2 summarises the outcome responses reported by schools in the pilot evaluation report. Case studies of the actions taken by specific schools, and the impact of those actions, can be found in the report (Social Ventures Consulting, 2016).

For the respondents surveyed, 76% of schools agreed or strongly agreed that Star Hubs played a catalytic role in driving changes at the school and 71% reported that it has already impacted the overall teaching and learning environment across the school in the first year of participation.

Table 14.2 Summary of pilot Hub school participation 2015–2016, after 1 year of participation

Outcome	Changes reported by schools
Overall value of the hub as reported by participating schools	76% agreed Star Hubs has played a catalytic role in driving change in my school 71% agreed Star Hubs has impacted the overall teaching and learning environment across my school 94% agreed in order to sustain the changes supported through Star Hubs my school needs to stay engaged in the initiative
Increased knowledge and connections	96% agreed I have acquired new knowledge that is relevant to my role in the school 93% agreed I have increased connections with like-minded leaders
Collaboration between schools	85% agreed my thinking and underlying beliefs have been positively challenged and changed 100% agreed my school feels like a part of a collegiate network with other Star Hub participants 100% agreed my school is willing and able to work in partnership with others 100% agreed my school has identified opportunities for mutually beneficial working relationships with other schools
Schools reporting new practices	94% agreed we have developed a plan for change (in one or multiple areas) informed by evidence of great practice 94% agreed we have implemented new practices
Improvements in the learning environment reported by schools	82% agreed as a result of the new practices my school has experienced positive changes in the teaching and learning environment 65% agreed as a result of the new practices students in my school have experienced improved learning outcomes
Schools opinion of likely outcomes without participation	35% agreed without participating in Star Hubs, my school would still have developed partnerships with other schools 88% agreed without participating in Star Hubs my school would still have implemented new practices 24% agreed without participating in Star Hubs my school would have experienced comparable improvements in learning outcomes

Connection Hub Schools Progress Report 2017

Building on the favourable indications from the pilot evaluation, The Connection hub school design was expanded further in 2017. An additional 15 schools were added to create a specialist STEM Learning Hub with support from a corporate philanthropic partner, Samsung Australia. The Star Hub group of schools was also expanded from 18 to 27 schools located across Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia. The Hub schools represented, in total 42 schools, each entering into a 3-year commitment supported by respective state education systems, commencing in the school year 2017. This brought the total group of participating schools to 50, inclusive of the eight original Powerhouse schools.

The first year of progress was evaluated by Social Ventures Australia Consulting (Social Ventures Australia Consulting, 2017). An overview of participating schools' feedback regarding the changes that occurred at their school in their first year, in line with target outcomes, as a result of participating in The Connection hub is included in this summary snapshot. The methodology included collecting survey responses to an end-of-year survey of school leaders and teachers, school self-assessments against the Project Action Plans implemented in their schools and interviews with selected school leaders. The target outcomes, both short-term and longer-term, are outlined in Fig. 14.5.

Schools' feedback throughout the year was analysed, together with the end-of-year survey and interviews. There were a number of common themes that participating schools reported:

- The Connection provides schools with *a unique and valued opportunity to be part of a national network and with other schools on a similar journey*. Schools valued highly the opportunity to discuss educational ideas and thinking with other school leaders. The Connection also provided a valued opportunity to engage in broader networks with people outside of education, thus providing new perspectives.
- Participation in The Connection helped *accelerate* the work that schools were doing to pursue partnerships and introduce new practices. Schools acknowledged that they take part in a number of net-

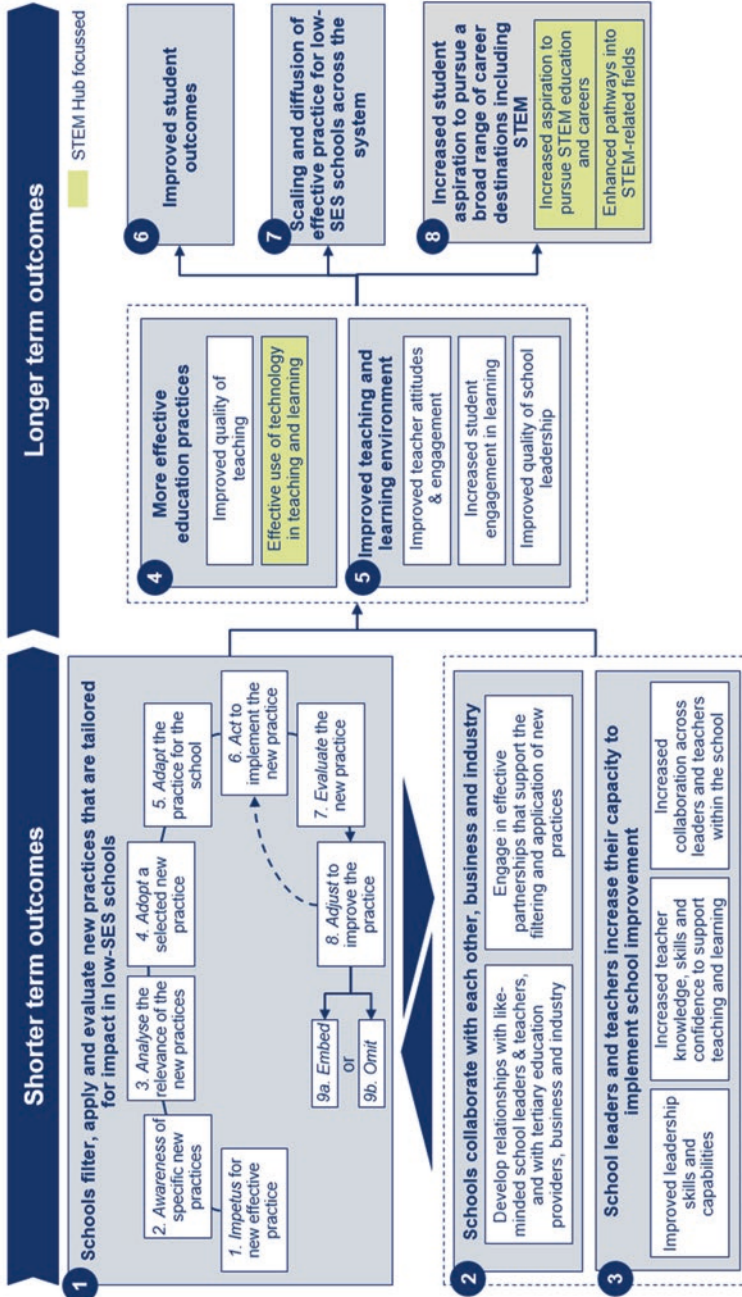


Fig. 14.5 Connection Hub school target outcomes for evaluation of progress in 2017

working and professional development opportunities outside of The Connection, and that it is difficult to credit school improvements specifically to Star Hubs. However, school comments affirm that participation in The Connection played a key role in driving those changes.

- Several schools commented that The Connection provided a *'one-touch' point* for planning and tracking school goals and change. It helped schools to articulate the focus of their work and *'set the path'* towards school improvement.
- In terms of the most evident school improvement changes, schools highlighted that being part of The Connection has strengthened *leadership capacity* across the school and promoted *growth and confidence* across teachers.

The data related to the short-term outcomes identified in Fig. 14.5 is summarised in Table 14.3.

The Impact of the Opportunity to Collaborate in Education

The SVA Connection initiative has been an opportunity to walk alongside both accomplished and aspiring school leaders as they deliver critical work in schools. The 5-year journey since 2014 has provided many valuable insights into real-world practice of school leaders who are making a difference in challenging contexts. It is clear from the interactions with The Connection schools that every education context that sits within a school community is nuanced with, and directed by, its own set of challenges. At the same time, there are overarching themes for the challenges identified across the cohort of schools. While evidence is still emerging through ongoing evaluations, it appears that there is a clear trend that collaboration across schools brings value to the school leadership role both within individual schools, but also system-wide.

In the instance of the 50 Connection schools, the challenges that the school leaders have identified are not definitively the same, but they are aligned. The opportunities to become connected with the other leaders

Table 14.3 Outcomes analysis after 1 year of a 3-year planned engagement

Outcome	Changes reported by schools
Schools filter, apply and evaluate new practices	92% of schools have developed a plan for change informed by evidence on great practice 88% have implemented new practice(s)
Schools collaborate with each other	88% of leaders and teachers have increased connections with like-minded leaders 75% of schools have identified opportunities for mutually beneficial working relationships with other schools
School leaders and teachers increase their capacity to implement school improvement	91% of schools met/exceeded their expectations of progress in improved school leadership (as set in their Project Action Plans) 83% of schools met/exceeded their expectations in increasing teacher skills or capacity (as set in their Project Action Plans) 61% of leaders and teachers have changed how they use colleagues within their own school
More effective school practices	71% of STEM schools said that technology has been an enabler of STEM practice
Improved teaching and learning environment	81% of schools have experienced positive changes in the teaching and learning environment 83% of schools met/exceeded their expectations in increasing student engagement (as set in their Project Action Plans)
Improved student outcomes	54% of schools report that students have experienced improved learning outcomes in the first year
Increased student aspiration in STEM	71% of STEM schools have observed change in their students' interest and inspiration to pursue STEM
Scaling and diffusion of effective practice for low-SES schools across the system	86% of STEM schools share practices adopted through the STEM Learning Hub with schools in our broader networks

who are committed to the similar core goals creates the shared insights to solve for challenges together and is therefore highly valued. School leaders in The Connection have reported consistently that they value being connected. The schools they are leading are learning together with others outside of their own context and they are implementing new and refined

practices that they believe are having an impact on student learning. The overall benefit of the collaboration has been the catalytic impact on driving new action both in schools and across systems. A significant majority of the participating schools, across all cohorts, report that participation has developed new actions that are progressing their work collectively much faster than they ever anticipated.

The value of collaborative networks, however, extends beyond just developing and sharing new practices. Mechanisms for strategic networking for collaboration in learning also promote sharing of expertise and critical thinking and problem solving which are enabling; efficiently connecting and creating leverage for assets and knowledge across systems.

The interactions in a trusted collegiate network can also be affirming and are a confidence booster to the leadership team of a school, identifying if they are on the right track towards building the conditions for learning impact. The network is a place to rely on to check perceptions, refine assumptions and seek feedback on strategy actions with like-minded colleagues who share an investment in the value of the success of the collective. There is no room for egos in the culture of professional trust that has developed, as every participant has value to add, an insight to share or a question to explore. There is no power dynamic or hierarchy as the network is an inclusive culture with shared values across the group.

The CLDN has emerged as a supportive, creative and rigorous learning culture where participants keep each other accountable yet are also comfortable enough to expose vulnerabilities in the shared quest to improve together. The silos created by school competition are broken down by the intention to become successful together. Within the CLDN, similar principles to those of the Ontario context described above by Hargreaves and Fullan have been applied to Australian school leaders. School leaders are powerful influencers as they translate policy priorities into teaching and learning practices. School leaders (also the middle players) are a critical leverage point for enacting responsive professional action. When school leaders demonstrate shared responsibility, trust, humility, intention and professional initiative together, they are also more confident to act. When they are collaboratively engaged in the decision-making processes to developing the intention to act,

they have an opportunity to be evidence-informed and to benefit from a bigger pool of collegiate expertise. When these school leadership teams are then placed in a position of influence within systems, their action and the learning contribute to important systems leadership modelling responsibilities. In systems design, the school leaders become the nodes of knowledge and expertise to be leveraged so that great practice has then the opportunity to become pervasive practice. Leading for learning becomes collaborative, inclusive and influential to create systems change.

Conclusion

Where does this leave the concepts of leadership discussed in this book? instructional leadership and leading for learning are both dimensions of this evolving culture of practice but cannot be solutions in isolation. The Connection schools have demonstrated that evolving school leadership practice is dynamic, multi-dimensional, responsive, creative and certainly professional. The most successful leaders create actions that are fit for context, responsive to need and driven by a quest for excellence with shared priority support of the collective. Successful school leaders are the emerging system leaders for learning improvement: Australian education excellence is a shared priority.

The CLDN is built around the shared insight that the complexity of the challenge requires creative expertise that is pooled, curated, rigorously challenged and informed by evidence of what works and how. It is a leadership that can be both instructional and is clearly focused on learning, but at the same time, it is learning for all participants.

Collaborative networking design builds an open inclusive exchange and enrichment of learning and sharing of leadership expertise. The act of collaborating creates collective responsibility so that new learning and shared efficacy work catalytically to translate practice into learning impact in real schools located in real communities. It is a practice-based response which has a purpose and real intent to make a difference. The Connection schools' preliminary data suggest that school leaders, when connected with a shared purpose, analyse, adopt,

adapt and enact new practice as they learn both with and from each other. The evaluation data collected also suggest that the participating Connection schools value the collegiate trust and the opportunity to build and explore evidence-informed practices together because it meets their professional needs to grow, which also supports them to lead more effectively.

Expressed within the experiences of the Australian Bright Spots Schools Connection, linking 50 schools in a CLDN over 5 years, the messages from school leaders are clear:

- Collective and shared practice is catalytic;
- Consultative practices are empowering, affirming and challenging;
- Empowerment is enabling;
- Collaborative practice shares the responsibility and accountabilities to grow impact; and
- Collaborative Network Leadership design taps into a diversity of ideas, knowledge and expertise, assets within systems to build better learning outcomes for all participants.

It is the opportunity of positioning and aligning quality-driven leadership expertise to the nuanced challenges of learning communities that will deliver renewed momentum in education practice.

Knowledge is pervasive in all learning communities. Cultivated expertise in collaborative learning networks can unleash its potential and direct it more broadly so that it can make a difference where it will be of most value. Successful school leaders can then move beyond adopting just one approach to deliver leadership actions, to practices that are about adapting and blending to create hybrid leadership practices and actions that are tailored and responsive to need more efficiently and effectively. Leaders' expertise can both grow and be cultivated to build highly effective learning communities across systems.

School leaders do have reason to take a seat at the table for system leaders and there is an important purpose for why they should be there. After all, individually we can make a difference but together we can and will have much more impact.

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