STRONGER TOGETHER: How Superintendent PLCs Can Make Your Job Easier, and Set Your District Up for Success
See how today’s superintendents are using AASA and Discovery Education to connect with peers nationwide, creating their own professional learning communities (PLCs) that can deliver advice anywhere, anytime, on any number of topics.

Every superintendent knows one key to fostering great teachers is to create vibrant communities of learners where staff can trade ideas, test theories, and crowdsourced the best solutions to perennial problems. But too often when superintendents retreat to their office to deal with the district’s thorniest problems, they are alone. What is natural for teachers—to form groups, trade advice, and support each other—is foreign to many educational leaders.

“It’s a lonely job to some extent,” says Dr. Chris Gaines, superintendent of the Mehlville School District in St. Louis.

“You are a position of one,” echoes Dr. Nick Polyak, superintendent Leyden High School District 212 in Franklin Park, Illinois.

Each superintendent has a cabinet that he or she consults with to complete much of the work of a district — creating budgets, updating curricula, and managing human resources. But this group has a built-in limit. As Polyak admits, “Sometimes you are dealing with things you don’t want to talk about with your team.” There are also some strategic initiatives that demand more expertise than your district team can muster.

But making decisions in isolation no longer needs to be the default for a superintendent. Today a growing number of school leaders are becoming part of national groups, connecting with peers on topics of interest, and making lifelong friends with fellow superintendents. In today’s hyper-connected world, superintendents are becoming the active learners they encourage their teachers to become. These leaders are reaching out via social media, email, telephone calls, and site visits. While these superintendent peer learning communities (PLCs) can take a variety of forms, what many have in common is a link back to AASA — The School Superintendents Association, the professional group for more than 13,000 educational leaders throughout the world.

“There’s been a shift that has occurred because of a recognition of where the expertise lies,”

Mort Sherman, the associate executive director of AASA, told Edutopia. “It’s not with the universities or the government researching education technology, but with the superintendents and staff in school districts doing the actual work.”

“To superintendents who are looking from the outside in, I can say you don’t see the whole picture until you get into a group.”

Jeff Dillon, the superintendent and elementary school principal of Idaho’s Wilder School District #133, discusses how only after he joined AASAs Personalized Learning Cohort did he fully understand its benefits. This cohort improves both his personal knowledge and his district’s future path.

“To superintendents who are looking from the outside in, I can say you don’t see the whole picture until you get into a group,” he says. “They’re really personalized learning for superintendents. There are a lot of opportunities out there. You just have to find the one that fits your need.”

Mark Edwards can trace the trajectory throughout his 22 years in public education. When he started as a superintendent, meetings with peers were limited.

“I valued the times we had,” says Edwards, who was most recently the superintendent of North Carolina’s Mooresville Graded School District. “Now that we’re collaborating online in a variety of ways, there’s more cross referencing with school district leaders today.”

Edwards has recently left Mooresville in 2016 to become the senior vice president of digital learning for Discovery Education, a leading provider of digital textbooks and curriculum-based digital content for K–12 school districts.

AASA has numerous groups available to help superintendents. Its Digital Consortium group, started in 2014, is for superintendents who want to learn together, to gain insight into emerging and successful models of best practices using digital media in support of engaging learning experiences. Superintendents must apply to join this group of about 40 and pay an annual membership fee, which covers expenses at the group’s three meetings each year. Each member is expected to create a capstone project highlighting best practices or policy notes.

Other groups include the AASA Collaborative, Personalized Learning Cohort, the AASA/Howard University Urban Superintendents Academy, the AASA/USC Urban Superintendents Academy, STEM Leadership with JASON Learning Consortium, the AASA National Superintendent Certification Program, and the Aspiring Superintendents Program. (Details about all of these programs can be found online at AASA’s website.2)

The Collaborative is a small, national network whose members advocate for legislation and policies that can transform school systems. The Collaborative challenges what might be considered as outdated traditions and practices. Members attend at least two face-to-face meetings, participate in a study group and reflect and write about their actions. The group also conducts occasional site visits to study a chosen topic at a district.

AASA’s Personalized Learning group was created in 2016. Members met for three days last year to, among other things, tour California’s Vista Unified School District. Vista’s superintendent, Devin Vodicka, is a leader in the use of open educational resources (OER) and one of his high schools was recently awarded a $10 million XQ Super Schools Project prize. The membership fee of $1,500 covers travel and hotel costs for the group’s two annual meetings.

AASA’s Urban Superintendents Academy is slightly different from the above groups. Created in partnership with Howard University and the University of Southern California in 2015, this group aims to better prepare leaders to succeed in urban districts. The one-year program includes access to mentors for each participant. In addition to national certification from AASA, three graduate credits are available.

In addition to AASA, companies such as Discovery Education are both creating stand-alone professional development and using its internal expertise to help bolster existing groups such as AASA’s. Edwards points out that in a new area such as digital learning, a company’s expertise can fill the gap when universities aren’t on top of the latest trends.

Citing Discovery Education’s work, he adds, “It’s inspirational to see examples of digital resources used that could illuminate the work of great teachers. I think companies can play a vital role because districts need focused professional support to take transformation to the next level.”

No educator — regardless of their role in the hierarchy of a district — needs to operate in isolation, said Lance Rougeux, Vice President of Discovery Education’s Learning Communities & Innovation. To succeed in today’s high-stakes climates, educators need a place where they can explore new ideas for their schools in a safe atmosphere with their peers, free from judgment or consequence.

Rougeux helps lead The Discovery Education Community, a professional learning network that helps connect school leaders with their peers around the world to share their wealth of knowledge.

“By participating in professional learning communities, district leaders are making new connections with each other, whether it’s in person or virtually,” said Rougeux. “They’re creating valuable, new relationships that can help them overcome any number of challenges they may face.”

Since it launched in 2005, thousands of educators have joined the Discovery Educator Network (DEN), a passionate group of leaders who share their stories of teaching with digital media, share resources, and network at nationwide conferences.

The Value of PLCs

Superintendents

To examine the effectiveness of superintendent PLCs, we need to first examine two main issues: What makes a good PLC, and how vital superintendents are to the learning that happens in their schools.

While AASAs groups are relatively new, the benefits of learning in a group are well documented, whether you are a superintendent, a principal, or a teacher. Researchers Judith Warren Little and Milbrey McLaughlin’s 1993 research, as reported on the All Things PLC website3, listed the seven top attributes of effective PLCs.

1. Shared norms and beliefs
2. Collegial relations
3. Collaborative cultures
4. Reflective practice
5. Ongoing technical inquiry regarding effective practice
6. Professional growth
7. Mutual support and mutual obligation

While most studies of PLCs consider teacher groups, the importance of superintendents on learning has been proven repeatedly. In a report titled Technology-savvy superintendents: Successes and challenges4, the authors write:

“The importance a superintendent has on learning has been proven through an extensive body of literature. Meta-analyses from Marzano and Waters5 and book-length research compilations6,7 all point in the same direction: School districts survive and thrive because of the decisions that their leaders make. Whether it is analyzing student data8, formulating policy9, observing and evaluating instruction10, or facilitating student achievement11, the evidence continues to support the assertion that leadership at the top matters.

“Unsurprising, leadership has been found to be the most impactful school-related influence on student learning after classroom teachers themselves12,13,14, accounting for approximately one fourth of all school-related effects on learning outcomes15. As DeVita observed16, there is no such thing as leader-proof school reform.”

The Benefits of Nationwide PLCs

Most superintendents naturally have several groups they can consult with regularly. Leaders typically stay in touch with former coworkers and also meet regularly with area and state superintendents once they take a district’s top job. The homegrown group is valuable because it’s comprised of trusted coworkers who you’ve used to help work through knotty problems. The local and state groups are important because every school leader has to be attuned to the workings of his or her state government. States make the specific rules that each district must follow, and all of them control at least some of your district’s funding.

But while these groups are vital, they are incomplete. As mentioned earlier, a robust PLC has seven necessary traits. Superintendents belonging to national groups say AASA’s groups meet each of the above requirements, especially ongoing technical inquiry regarding effective practice.

“Within a state you can get stuck in a rut of conversations.”

For Dr. Jill Gildea, superintendent of Fremont School District 79 in Mundelein, Illinois, the difference is easy to explain. In state groups, “our conversations are in the moment, what’s happening in the county, state, and resources. The discussion is a little more narrow. [In AASA’s national groups] we take a broader topic, such as equity or going 1:1.”

Gildea is a member of two AASA groups, the Digital Consortium and the Personalized Learning Cohort. “They are like a national support team. It really has helped us to change our school district.” When the superintendent wanted to dive into the topic of learner-centered practices, she hosted a site visit at her 2,200-student district. Many of the visitors were from her AASA connections. The day-long visit benefited both district staff and visitors, she said, as they traded ideas.

“Within a state you can get stuck in a rut of conversations,” says Idaho’s Jeff Dillon. “There’s not enough funding, the legislature wants this, the state department wants this. That drives a lot of our conversations.”

But when he’s in a group with people from outside Idaho, “It’s what’s working, what’s happening. You look at problems differently. ‘How’d you make it work?’ How can I make it work here.” When he wanted to have a discussion about personalized learning, “I can’t have that conversation with anyone in Idaho. No one’s doing it,” he said.

“There are some things that apply directly and some things that don’t apply at all,” said Dr. David Hicks, superintendent of Sherman Independent School District in Texas. Because his state doesn’t have teachers unions, some personnel discussions simply don’t apply to him.

But Hicks points out another benefit of national groups — they can be a safe place to raise sensitive issues outside the glare of local media, parents, or even an overzealous board member.

“I can ask questions to bring out the best approach, tailor my ideas,” he said.

Saving Time, Deep Learning

Superintendents can be extraordinarily busy individuals. They face a to-do list that grows daily and never shrinks. The day-to-day business of running a district is all-consuming, and then they must plan for the future. Adding a task to their plate is a tough sell. But everyone involved in AASA’s leadership groups says that investing time in working in these groups can actually save them time in the long run.

Jessica Huizenga, the receiver and superintendent of Southbridge Public Schools in Massachusetts, valued her time in these groups as a way to help her avoid potential pitfalls.

As a first-time superintendent, she faces a daunting array of tasks and says the year-long academy has helped her prioritize her work. She traveled to Washington, D.C.
for two days every month and was trained in various modules, such as budgeting, human resources, branding and communications. Speakers included Thomas Tucker, AASA’s 2016 Superintendent of the Year.

“We heard from people who are at the top of their games,” she said. “You just don’t get access to this caliber of speaker anywhere else.”

Although her year in the program is complete, Huizenga says she is staying involved by making presentations at future events.

“We became a tight family,” she said of the 24 members in her cohort. “Those relationships are forever. I have a living, breathing network of people I can go to at anytime.”

Hicks found that the time spent away from his district can be painful, but is ultimately worth it. It helps that his board understands the value, he said.

“Time is a struggle for everybody,” admits Hicks. “I make it a commitment and my board is very supportive of my commitment to personal growth and learning. It’s well worth it, because of the benefits to our kids of all the things we’ve talked about.”

Participants in other AASA groups say the ability to zero in on specifics make their PLCs valuable. Dillon, who has been in his job for four years, said being part of the Personalized Learning group allowed him to focus on acquiring the knowledge he needed to make changes quickly.

“Attending a conference is a hodge podge of ideas. Being in a small cohort, you get your feet in deep,” said Dillon.

Dillon has brought radical change quickly to his rural, high poverty district. Starting this school year, he eliminated grade level identifications in his elementary school, received a waiver from Idaho to release seat time requirements, eliminated bells at his middle school and high school, and put students in charge of their own learning.

“That’s moving pretty quick,” he acknowledged. The insight gained from his AASA group helped to seed the district’s radical overhaul, lifting them up to where they needed to be, he said.

Dr. Michael Lubelfeld, superintendent of Deerfield Public Schools District 109, said being part of the Digital Consortium inspired him.

“It gave me a greater degree of confidence in leading faster and not waiting to learn. There were groups of people doing the same thing I was doing, or a version of it,” he said.

Being in a group with leaders from different types of districts is helpful for the superintendent of a wealthy, 3,000-student district. He calls his group an “intellectual think-tank” that he can tap for advice on any subject, from transgender bathroom signage to how to best deploy a new technology.

“A week doesn’t go by that I’m not in some degree of contact,” he added.

As a side benefit, Lubelfeld has created a deep friendship with Polyak. The two have co-written a book due out soon titled “The Unlearning Leader: Leading for Tomorrow’s Schools Today.”

Making Connections

In the past, superintendents had limited pathways to network. Today, there are numerous ways to connect, and savvy superintendents utilize all of them to stay in contact with their PLCs.

“In the old days, we’d meet at a coffee shop or as a foursome on the golf course,” said Polyak. Now Polyak can juggle messages between Twitter, email, the telephone or his new favorite, Voxer, a smartphone app that works like a walkie-talkie. Polyak can record a message while he drives to work, send it out to his followers, and get numerous responses before he arrives at his desk.

Polyak says many relationships he has these days start on social media. He often gets a sense of a person by
seeing not only what they write, but also by what stories they share link to. Some conversations lend themselves better to social media, he said. When the question of transgender students and overnight field trips came up recently, he reached out to offer his PLCs advice via Voxer, a closed network.

In a 2014 report studying the social media uses of superintendents, two of the six key reasons the authors recommended using social media were that it “can have a significant impact on a school superintendent’s personal and professional growth,” and “social media tools provide stronger connections to local stakeholders, to fellow educators, and to the world.”

One of the superintendents quoted in the report spoke of the benefits of Twitter in particular: “I really do feel like I’m learning from people across the country that I never would have even known about before, so to me that’s a huge leap and an opportunity to learn.”

In one case, being connected even helped a superintendent land his next job. When this superintendent was given a question and an hour to prepare during an interview, he tweeted the question out to his curated personal learning network (PLN).

“When he came back into the board room he told them, ‘I actually don’t think you want to know what I think. I think you want the best thinking and [you] want me to explain to you how that will make sense and work in our context.’ When he talked to the board more about his PLN, he said, “I built this amazing network of people around the world that I’m connected to and so that’s just huge! And so the next time I apply for a job, they are not just getting me, they are getting this huge network of people I bring.”

Visitors in Mooresville aren’t just allowed to speak with students and teachers, they are encouraged to do so. Edwards remembers how middle school students implored Houston ISD board members, representing the fifth-largest district in the country, to make the digital transition. “Students are the best messengers,” he adds.

To maximize a school visit, Edwards recommends bringing a team of people from your district. “We had the state department of Georgia bring 20 people once,” he recalls. “The whole dynamic of learning is contagious.”

Gaines said learning about educational innovations through social media can prepare him and his team to take a deeper dive in person.

“We make connections with people and when they have something going on in their district, we can send a team of people,” he said.

He’s already sent people to Taylor County Schools in Kentucky and Vista Unified School District in California. He said his 10,000-student district is doing some similar work as these groundbreaking districts, but these locations are implementing changes more systematically.

“We want to see how we can better scale our work,” he added.

Hicks was part of the group that visited Gildea’s district recently. He said including researchers and authors in the visit allowed everyone to hear from widely respected practitioners on topics that are tailored to the superintendents’ interests.

In-Person Learning

With so many ways to connect, it might seem as if in-person meetings are being discounted, but all these methods of contact seem to be leading to an increase in site visits, where school leaders can see examples firsthand.

As one of the first districts in the country to adopt Chromebook laptops for all students, Polyak’s district has hosted some 3,000 visitors through his 3,500-student district near Chicago. He learned about the basics of effective site visits in part through his visit to Edwards’s Mooresville district.

"The whole dynamic of learning is contagious."
Empowered Together

A new breed of superintendents is falling back on tried-and-true methods to increase both their personal growth and the work of teaching and learning in their districts. These leaders use national groups pioneered by AASA to create personal professional learning communities. Superintendents are using tools from the latest communications apps to Twitter to site visits to gain knowledge and share expertise about items large and small.

Because of his work in these groups, Polyak said his reach and understanding of education leadership across the nation has broadened.

“I know about trends in schools in California and Florida. It gives me a much broader picture. I feel like I’m a better educator,” he said.

About the Author

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Wayne is an award-winning education editor and writer, having covered issues, leaders, and technology in K-12 for more than a decade. For seven years, Wayne was the editor-in-chief of Scholastic Administrator. His work has also been featured recently in Sierra magazine, the Washington Post, and Education Next. Wayne was also a member of his town’s Connecticut school board for five years, and vice chairman from 2008-2009.

Discovery Education is the leading provider of digital content and professional development for K-12 classrooms worldwide. For more information about Discovery Education’s services and initiatives, visit www.discoveryeducation.com.

Established in 2014, the AASA Digital Consortium was created to support school district leadership in the areas of innovation, creativity and technology. For more information, visit www.aasa.org/DigitalConsortium.aspx.