

Reflections on the Evolution of the New Jersey Network of Superintendents

2008-2012

Prepared for the NJNS Design Team

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Superintendents face a daunting list of tasks every day. In recent years, that list has grown even longer as the emphasis in educational leadership has expanded from a focus on organization and management to instructional leadership (Coldren & Spillane, 2007; Heck, Larson, & Marcoulides, 1990; Krug, 1992; Noble, Sweetman, & Blamey, 2010). As instructional leaders, superintendents are now expected to engage directly in their districts' efforts to strengthen the "instructional core"—the relationship between students, teachers, and content (Cohen & Ball, 1999; Elmore, 2002, 2007). In response, many superintendents are trying to spend more time in classrooms, more time analyzing data on student performance, and more time in discussions and decisions about curriculum, instruction, and professional development.

Beyond improving instruction in general, however, superintendents also face increasing demands to address persistent differences in educational opportunities and outcomes for students from different backgrounds. In order to address those differences, superintendents are also being called upon to be "equity warriors"—using their positional authority at the head of school systems to break the links between students' backgrounds and their educational outcomes (Leverett, 2011; Peterkin, Jewell-Sherman, Kelley, & Boozer, 2011).

Although many believe efforts to improve instruction in general and efforts to address inequities should go hand in hand, the relationship between the two is not well understood. In fact, a broad review of the literature on equity suggests that superintendents often take what can be called "distributive" or "transformative" approaches to equity which may or may not directly address the instructional core (Kliegman & Hatch, 2012). While both approaches to equity are necessary, neither one on its own is sufficient. "Distributive" strategies emphasize allocating or re-allocating resources and personnel (funding, supplies, and teachers) and/or creating equal

opportunities for students (e.g. placement in advanced classes). Strategies that focus on allocation of resources include superintendents' efforts to use weighted student formulas or other means to ensure that students from high-poverty backgrounds and/or lower performance levels receive either equal funding and resources or additional funding and resources in comparison to their peers (see, for example, Childress, et al., 2009 and Peterkin et al., 2011). Strategies that focus on creating equal opportunities include efforts to create inclusive classrooms, de-track schools, and increase access to advanced and gifted and talented programs (see for example, Alsbury and Whitaker, 2006; Childress, et al., 2009; Wells & Oakes, 1996). Although these distributive approaches may touch on some aspects of the instructional core, simply reallocating resources or increasing access does not guarantee that students learning experiences will actually improve. Increased funding can be used for purposes that may or may not affect instruction, and students from different backgrounds or achievement levels in de-tracked classes can still receive curricula or support from their teachers at varying levels of rigor.

Transformative approaches attempt to take into account the wider cultural, political and economic issues that contribute to the inequities in resource allocation and educational opportunity that students experience in schools. For example, many transformative approaches strive to address and change the beliefs and assumptions of district staff and/or the wider community that may reinforce stereotypes and lead to unequal treatment (Capper, 1993; Shields, 2010). Thus, failure to develop social relationships and communication patterns that allow for the development of shared beliefs and understanding can also undermine efforts to allocate or re-allocate educational resources and opportunities more equitably. Notably, efforts to de-track schools have been blocked on numerous occasions when they failed to address or reshape underlying beliefs and expectations about students' abilities (Cooper, 1996; Riehl, 2000; Wells

& Oakes, 1996). At the same time, however, leaders can actually inhibit work on equity if they promote discussion of and attention to diversity but do not connect that work to work on instruction (Capper, 1993).

For the past four years, the members of the New Jersey Network of Superintendents (NJNS)¹ have experienced the challenges of improving instruction overall and addressing issues of equity at the same time. Begun in 2008 and led by a design team supported by the Panasonic Foundation, NJNS has focused on developing a community of practice for superintendents who are committed to developing their capabilities both as instructional leaders and as leaders for equity. The network meets monthly during the school year, and superintendents engage in classroom observations and instructional rounds in one another's schools; identify issues of equity that may contribute to the underperformance of some groups of students in their districts, and develop theories of action to address these issues. In 2011-12, the network had thirteen members, including nine who have participated in the network since the first or second year. At the end of the 2011-12 year, one of the superintendents moved to a different state, one left the network for personal reasons, and four new members joined for a total of fifteen members for the upcoming 2012-13 year (see Appendix A for information on the 2012-2013 member districts).

While the work of the network and the theory of action underlying it has evolved, the network has always been rooted in the idea that by engaging in a community of practice with their peers, developing abilities to observe instruction and to identify and address issues of equity, superintendents will be better able to make decisions and develop systemic approaches in

¹ The Network was launched with initial support from the Panasonic Foundation and the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation. The Panasonic Foundation provides current funding for the network and the design team. The design team is led by the Executive Director of the Panasonic Foundation (who is also a former superintendent) and includes several consultants with experience and expertise in school leadership, administrations, and teaching learning. The authors of this report serve as the documentation team for the network and also participate as members of the design team.

their districts that lead to both improvements in instruction and improved learning outcomes for all students. In this short report, we summarize the evolution of the network and the theory of action underlying it, describe how the superintendents' involvement in the network may be affecting their work toward equity in their districts, and reflect on the next steps that may be needed to continue to bring together work on equity and instruction in NJNS and in the work of superintendents more broadly.² To do so, we draw on data collected through a survey of all participating superintendents, annual interviews with a sample of superintendents, notes and transcriptions from monthly meetings, and case studies of the NJNS-related work ongoing in four NJNS districts.

Evolution of the NJNS Work on Instruction and Equity from 2008-09 to 2011-12

The network began with a theory of action that assumed that focusing on instruction would lead superintendents to address and make improvements in equity (see Appendix B to follow the network's evolving theory of action). Correspondingly, the monthly meetings of the network focused primarily on instructional rounds visits to schools in participating districts as well as time and support for superintendents to develop district-wide theories of action. However, analysis of the agendas and transcriptions of the conversations in the meetings during the first two years showed little explicit attention to issues of equity. Up until the last meeting of the second year, there were no specific meeting agenda items related to equity, and issues of equity were not central to the problems of practice that were a focus of the rounds visits.

² This brief report is drawn from the full report on the fourth year of network activities (Roegman & Hatch, 2012) and a series of papers focusing on different aspects of the work of the network: AYP, Access, and Opportunity: An Exploration of Superintendents' Conceptions of Equity (Kliegman & Hatch, 2012); Getting to Equity in a Network of Superintendents: Issues, Approaches and Challenges in a Wide-range of District Contexts (Hatch & Kliegman, 2012); and From the Superintendent to the Instructional Core: Relationships, Resources, and Instructional Rounds (Hatch & Kliegman, in press)

In response to the growing recognition that network activities were focusing on instruction but not on equity, the design team decided to devote a significant portion of the last meeting of the second year to a presentation and discussion in which superintendent Jerry Weast described the efforts to create more equitable outcomes for all students in Montgomery County, Maryland. His presentation highlighted the identification of “red zones” – neighborhoods within the district that had historic patterns of poor educational outcomes for students in poverty, students of color, and English language learners. Building off this presentation, the following year the design team devised a series of activities asking superintendents to look for specific issues of equity by identifying “red zones” in their own districts. Network discussions and activities then engaged superintendents in reflecting on their “red zones,” on the factors that might contribute to underperformance, and on the strategies and approaches that they were using to address issues of equity and underperformance in their districts. As a result of these activities, in the third year, equity was explicitly on the agenda in seven of nine meetings.

In the network’s fourth year, the design team continued the explicit focus on equity through its revised theory of action, which suggested that when superintendents develop problems of practice related to equity and instruction within their districts, and when they receive support to attack these problems from the design team, then they will advance equity and excellence for all students. In working on identifying red zones and tying issues of equity into instructional rounds visits, the network developed a plan to pair an instructional rounds visit with a “consultancy” protocol. In this protocol, conducted a month before the rounds visit, the host superintendent and district leadership team presented an issue of equity that the district was facing and received feedback from network members. Throughout the fourth year, the network

participated in three pairings, first with a consultancy and then with a rounds visit in one of the district's schools. One superintendent also hosted a stand-alone consultancy.

Thus, the plans for fourth year, building off of the third year, continued to make equity an explicit part of NJNS activities and reflected a theory of action that assumed that if superintendents identified red zones in their own districts, then work in instructional rounds would naturally focus on the students in those red zones and the issues of teaching and learning that might be affecting them.

Findings from NJNS's Fourth Year

With the evolution of the network's theory of action and the corresponding changes in the design of network activities, in the fourth year, issues of equity were on the agenda in nine of ten meetings. While equity was getting onto the agenda of the monthly meetings, however, the work on instruction and equity still was not always connected. For example, in one of the consultancy/rounds pairings, the problem presented in the consultancy related to the alignment of district goals, and the problem presented in the rounds visit focused on differentiation to meet the cognitive needs of all learners. Similarly, in another pairing, the consultancy focused on alignment between the superintendent's and site principals' theories of action, while the rounds visit considered different literacy expectations in general education and special education settings. In each of these pairings, little attention was paid to the connections between both problems, and the problems of practice in the consultancies were not about equity. Only in the first pairing of the year were both problems related and focused on equity, with the consultancy focusing on interventions in the six lowest-performing preK-8 schools, and the rounds visit looking at how these interventions were playing out in the classrooms of one of these schools. Another challenge stemming from the network's theory of action was the individualized nature

of the focus on districts' problems of practices. Even where districts were experiencing similar challenges, such as two districts engaged in de-tracking, little formal attention was paid to collectively working on how to engage in this work.

At the end of the fourth year, the interviews with superintendents and the case studies in the districts provided some insights into the different approaches to equity that the superintendents are taking. They also revealed some of the critical challenges of context, capacity, and politics that may have made it difficult to engage in the systemic and transformative work that might bring together district work on instruction and equity. At the same time, there are also a number of indications of the ways that the work the superintendents are doing in the monthly meetings can have an influence on the instructional core and classroom practice in their districts and contribute to the development of specific initiatives related to equity as well.

Distributive Versus Transformative Approaches to Equity

Consistent with the literature on the equity-related work of superintendents, our analysis of the discussions and interviews at the end of the network's fourth year shows that many superintendents are using distributive strategies in order to address issues of underperformance and inequity in their districts. These distributive strategies include efforts to provide specific groups of students with additional resources and/or opportunities that are intended to support improvements in learning. For example, one superintendent's district is reallocating reading tutors to schools that have the highest numbers of students scoring below proficiency, while another district has developed special early morning and summer programs specifically for lower-performing Hispanic students. A number of superintendents have also implemented specific programs during the school day to help students who have been identified as lower-

performing or in need of special services or special education. These include programs like Read 180 and AVID.

Other superintendents are putting in place structures or learning experiences that are designed to create equal learning opportunities for all. In addition to developing wrap-around services for struggling students, for example, one superintendent has also replaced half-day kindergarten with a full-day kindergarten program because he felt afternoon day care and school options were previously limited to children from families with higher incomes. Two superintendents are also working on reducing the number of different levels or “tracks” for students in middle or high schools in their districts in order to ensure that all students are engaged in learning activities that are preparing them for college.

These programs and structures are clearly part of the work necessary to create more equitable school systems. At the same time, in network discussions and interviews, superintendents often acknowledge the problem that not everyone in their districts believes that all students, regardless of background or classification, can achieve at high levels. Eight of the nine superintendents see a need to develop explicit approaches to equity that relate to teachers’, administrators’, or community member beliefs. For example, one superintendent said, “I find too often that our staff does approach kids from a sense of deficiencies as opposed to looking for where their strengths.” Another said,

We talked about the fact that we’re struggling with how to get our teachers to have higher expectations of our students. How do we motivate the teachers to not think that these kids are incapable of doing things but to really get them to understand that if you expose them and you push them, you’d be surprised that they’ll do it?

A third expressed a similar concern: “I guess I have not yet been able to wholesale sell a reason for urgency or a reason for doing something different.” The superintendents in this network raise several needs related to approaching equity from a transformative stance: developing strength-

based views of students, having high expectations for all students, and creating awareness that change is required.

Conversations in meetings and in interviews also surfaced a number of concerns about taking the kind of transformative approaches to equity that might address these underlying beliefs. For example, five superintendents in their interviews suggested that raising issues of equity as a dangerous proposition that could create resistance that might block initiatives or lead to their own termination. As one superintendent put it, “If your local context is that the haves get and the have-nots don’t,” raising issues of equity can be the “third rail that kills you.” Another superintendent, who is working on de-leveling and reallocating resources to support students with greater needs, has received significant negative attention in print media, social media, and board meetings, as well as hate mail. In one instance, the superintendent explained that he listened as a White member of the community used the public questions segment of the board meeting to declare that when he moved to the district, he did not sign up “for reparations,” and that if the superintendent didn’t change his rhetoric, it would be a disincentive for other affluent people to move to the community. For superintendents working in communities where dominant constituencies are not in support of equity, part of leading for equity requires transformative work with community members as well as teachers and administrators. Participation in NJNS offers the possibility of supporting superintendents in working with their communities. One superintendent reflected on his own network participation, feeling like instructional leadership was a strength, but “some of the [NJNS] conversations about how you gauge the local politics to know when to put your foot on the gas, when to put your foot on the brake” have been most useful for him in thinking about the pace of implementation of equity-minded reforms in his district.

Issues of Context, Capacity, and Politics in Addressing Inequities

In parallel with the findings from the meetings and interviews, initial work in the case study districts has led to the identification of three broad areas of challenges for districts engaged in reforms related to equity: issues of context, capacity, and politics (see Hatch & Kliegman, 2012, for a more in-depth discussion of these challenges).

Challenges of Context

In terms of context, the demographics of each district – particularly the extent of diversity and heterogeneity or homogeneity in terms of race, cultural background and student performance – appears to be connected to how superintendents approach issues of equity and the possibilities they see for reform. Superintendents from districts with greater homogeneity in terms of students' racial backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and/or performance have found the concept of “red zone” more difficult to apply in their districts. For example, in largely homogenous high-performing districts, superintendents can identify underperforming students, but those students may not be clustered in particular geographic areas or the numbers may be small enough to make it difficult to identify contributing factors to low performance that are organizational and systemic.

In contrast, superintendents from districts with greater diversity in terms of both student race and student performance generally have been able to identify “red zones” relatively easily; these red zones have focused on achievement gaps between African American and/or Hispanic students and higher performing White and Asian peers. In addition to the diversity of their districts, time and the evolution of the communities also help to create very different contexts for the superintendents' work on equity. While all the communities are changing in some ways, the populations in some districts are more stable while others have evolved dramatically within a

period of a few years. Correspondingly, in some districts that have remained largely homogenous, issues of race and class have rarely been a part of community discussions; while in those districts that have been more diverse for some time, issues like the achievement gap have been part of public debates for years. In districts that are rapidly becoming more diverse, however, issues of the equity are rapidly developing and take on a specific character that distinguishes them from generic discussions of the “achievement gap.” Thus, in one of the NJNS districts, the proportion of East Asian, Hispanic, and African-American students in the exurban district has changed rapidly over a fifteen year period (see Table 1). This demographic shift has led to the emergence of an achievement gap between two immigrant groups, East Asian and Hispanic.

Table 1

Number of students enrolled in exurban district middle school by race

	1995	2005	2010
White	400	500	350
Asian	100	250	320
African American	90	280	280
Hispanic	50	250	350
Total student enrollment	640 students	1,280 students	1,300 ³

Challenges of Capacity

Capacity issues that make it difficult to bring together work on instruction and equity are related to the technical, human, and social capital in each district. Technical capital includes funding, facilities, technologies and the other resources available; human capital includes the skills, knowledge and dispositions of the personnel in the district; and social capital includes the networks of relationships, trust, and collective commitment shared by those in the district (Cohen

³ Numbers and percentages are rounded off

& Ball, 1999; Corcoran & Goertz, 1995; Goertz, Floden & O'Day, 1996; Malen & Rice, 2004; Newman, King & Youngs, 2000; Putnam, 2002; Spillane, Hallet, & Diamond, 2003; Spillane & Thompson, 1997). In terms of technical capital, superintendents have to find new sources of funding and figure out ways to use budget cuts judiciously to launch or sustain work on equity. In the process, they also have to develop a convincing rationale for using resources and re-allocating existing resources in ways that support the lowest-performing students while still building confidence amongst school and community members that resources are being used fairly and effectively to meet the needs of all students. In one urban NJNS district, for example, allocations of resources to schools that were identified as part of a “red zone” were aided by the fact that initial district-wide investments were contributing to improved student outcomes across the district. In contrast, in a suburban district that has invested in de-leveling the middle school, the district’s analysis of initial results showed some improvements in outcomes for some students and no negative effect overall; nonetheless, the results were still disputed by some in the district who felt that their children were disadvantaged by the initiatives, and the results to date remain a continuing source of debate between supporters and critics of the de-leveling plans. One response to these concerns has been to invest in another initiative – turning the middle school into an International Baccalaureate school – that many perceive as a benefit for all students.

Beyond funding and other forms of technical capital, work on rounds and red zones in the case study districts depends on central office administrators who are knowledgeable about instruction, skilled in data analysis, and committed to equity—human capital. In one NJNS district, the implementation of the rounds procedure and related equity work, for example, benefitted from a key administrator who was already familiar with instructional rounds when the

superintendent got involved with the network. Expertise with data analysis may also be a crucial support for work on identifying red zones and addressing issues of equity. In fact, several of the districts that have gone the furthest with the red zones work have been larger districts that have benefitted from the support of assistant superintendents who have specific responsibilities for data collection and analysis. In those districts without staff whose jobs focus on data collection and analysis, the work of examining and interpreting reams of data often falls on individual principals and the superintendents themselves, who may or may not have any relevant training and who are already overwhelmed with competing responsibilities.

In addition to figuring out how to deal with the realities and limits of the technical and human capital available, the superintendents are also constrained by the time and opportunities they have to meet with and work with others. For many of them however, participating in the NJNS has helped to develop the networks of relationships that provide access to those outside the districts who have relevant expertise and can provide the intellectual as well as emotional and moral support needed to address issues of instruction and equity. The connections with the members of the design team in particular gives these superintendents access to feedback, encouragement, and pressure from experienced administrators and superintendents who have worked extensively on issues of instruction and equity. For example, in one network meeting, a superintendent commented:

One thing the network has done for me personally is it both gives me inspiration and invokes guilt. That's Scylla and Charybdis, that concept of pressure and support, because I feel the support, the intellectual tools, the resources are all important things I have brought back to the district, but because of those challenges of the superintendency to always remain focused, when I realize this meeting is coming up and I think, "What I have done since last meeting to further the work?", that's where the guilt emerges, but it does give hope. It's not a burdensome guilt.

The growing relationships among the superintendents themselves have also created opportunities for them to share ideas, information, and support. In some instances, for example, superintendents have not only helped one another learn how to use new technologies, they have also provided access to staff members who have assisted superintendents from neighboring NJNS districts in analyzing their data.. Participating in the network meetings also provides superintendents with a place where they can talk about instruction and equity in ways that they feel that they cannot do in any of the normal venues where they meet other superintendents. As one superintendent put it in a written reflection after a Network meeting, “While my colleagues sit around griping at [the county superintendents meeting] today, I’m feeling renewed, again: Focused on what really matters and how my practice might influence it.” The superintendents interactions with one another also provides the emotional and social support and encouragement that can help sustain them through difficult times and difficult work.

Political Challenges

As discussed above, superintendents who have a vision of equity, either distributive or transformative, face political challenges within their districts. One superintendent was accused of engaging in reparations for allocating more funding to lower-performing students, a distributive strategy, while another believes that the culture of the district around advanced classes is so powerful that to even raise the issue of de-tracking would lead to losing the job. In general, the district demographic contexts contribute to different political contexts that the superintendents have to navigate. That navigation has to take into account the specific character of the equity issues, the extent to which those issues are recognized publicly, and the extent to which those issues are pursued in contested or collaborative ways. In almost any context, however, superintendents face the risk that if they publicly highlight an issue of equity, people in the

community may well blame the superintendent and the district for failing to address the problem or they may use the problem as a way to attack and undermine the superintendent and the district's work. For example, even with relatively good relationships between the schools, the members of the community, and the school board, the urban superintendent works in an environment in which key political figures in the city have attacked the district and school board members in the press and in the courts. That political environment makes it extremely difficult to pursue plans the district is developing to address an emerging achievement gap between African American students and both White and Hispanic students that recent red zones analyses identified. As the superintendent explained:

We are an organization that lives in a political environment, and I have political enemies that want to take over the board, so why the hell am I going to give them a reason to take me down? I mean, this [red zones] analysis was a good analysis, and it tells us where we're going to work. But it also – in the wrong hands, it could be used to hurt us... If the bad people are trying to get you out and you're trying to be transparent about an issue that needs to be addressed then you've got to be cautious about how you release that [information] because you want to work on it, but you don't want it to be the bullet that takes you out either.

For this superintendent, and for many of his colleagues, whether or not to work on issues of equity is not a question; but questions about how to raise, pursue, and sustain equity issues within a political environment remain an important part of the work.

Two superintendents who are de-tracking their middle schools and/or high schools see the network as providing emotional support and inspiration in this politically challenging work. In fact, all participating superintendents recognize the network and the design team for offering them a place of learning and a place for analysis and refinement of their theories of action. While the superintendents continue to face issues of context, capacity, and politics, the case studies also suggest that there may be four key avenues through which the work these superintendents are doing, in a small group once a month, may have some impact on the work in their districts:

1. Superintendents learn more about instruction, observation, work in the classroom; and this learning influences their decisions that affect classroom practice
2. Superintendents get information, ideas, tools, routines & resources from network and share them with district staff; this sharing affects staff decisions and actions that influence classroom practice
3. Superintendents adopt instructional rounds/consultancies/equity analyses in district; these adopted activities build relationships in the district and focus attention and work on equity and instructional core
4. The network provides emotional support and pressure/guilt for superintendents to engage in challenging work.

Interviews with administrators and observations of instructional rounds in one district, for example, suggest that ideas and resources emphasized in the work of the NJNS may come together with a number of other factors to influence the instructional core in one district. For example, the superintendent has introduced NJNS readings to his administrative staff, engaged his leadership team in activities such as identifying red zones, and asking principals to formally develop their theories of action (see Hatch & Kliegman, in press, for a more in-depth discussion of this district).

Implications and Next Steps

Considering superintendents' strategies for addressing equity, the primary strategies currently underway that connect to the instructional core involve access to educational opportunities and interventions for lower-performing students. It is not yet clear, however, to what extent these largely distributive strategies may be changing students' experiences in their classrooms. Thus, if a more rigorous curriculum is developed, but teachers and students choose to focus on the least demanding activities, or if more students enroll in AP classes, but teachers still assume that students from some backgrounds are more likely to be successful than others, then these equity-based strategies may have little impact on teaching and learning. In response to the findings on the focus on distributive strategies and the challenges of integrating work on equity and instruction, the design team has developed a plan to focus the next two years of NJNS

work around a common theme, for the first time identifying a network problem of practice (POP). Network activities also aim to engage superintendents in addressing the broader cultural and social issues and beliefs within their communities. To launch the work of the fifth year, the design team has drafted a network POP that centers on the rigor of learning opportunities that all students both within and across districts are experiencing.

Too many students are not experiencing rigorous intellectual engagement that results in college and career readiness and success; the opportunities for this kind of engagement are inequitably distributed.

Developing a network POP may have several advantages. First, it eliminates the need for each district and each host school to develop its own problem of practice every time the network comes for a rounds visit or a consultancy. Second, it allows the network to sustain a focus on a critical issue of instruction and equity: access to the kinds of rigorous and challenging learning experiences that will prepare all students for success both inside and outside of college. Third, given that the cultural and social issues that contribute to inequities cut across school and district boundaries, adopting a network POP can help to shift the NJNS meetings from a focus on the independent work of superintendents in different districts to the development of a more collective approach to issues of equity and instruction.

In recognition of some of the common initiatives that will have a significant impact on equity and instruction in their districts in the coming years, the network will also devote time to opportunities to discuss and examine the development of new approaches to teacher evaluation and to the implementation of curriculum and assessments related to the Common Core State Standards. Ideally, these opportunities will also help to develop the connections and relationships across the districts that can contribute to the kind of collective capacity and collective responsibility needed to pursue a more transformative approach to equity across

districts. While these activities grow out of the most recent iteration of a constantly evolving theory of action, the experiences of the network over the past four years also suggest the need to rethink some of the basic conceptions that animated the initial theory of action:

1. **Rethinking diversity** – The changing demographics and the conditions in each of the districts makes it clear that “diversity” is becoming more diverse than ever before. Where diversity once focused largely on White and African-American populations, diversity now encompasses a multiplicity of ethnicities, races, classes, abilities, and orientations, making it much more difficult to find “comparable” districts and creating synergies and tensions that are very different in different districts. As a consequence, generic conceptions of the “achievement gap” are often insufficient to motivate systemic strategies. Instead, superintendents need to be able to navigate the multiplicity of beliefs around expectations for students from different groups and to recognize the specific opportunities and challenges that come with the changing demographics in their communities. Addressing all of these differences takes considerable contextual and cultural knowledge and understanding of and access to the networks of relationships that can connect or isolate their students and their families.
2. **Rethinking instructional leadership** – Focusing on instruction in general is not sufficient to enable all students to reach high standards of achievement. Too often, that means focusing on minimal levels of learning and lowest common denominator instruction. “Proficiency” is a particularly inadequate learning goal for underserved students who may not have opportunities in other aspects of their lives for the experiences and enrichment that support the highest levels of achievement in all aspects of their development. Further, focusing on instruction without explicit attention to issues of equity may lead to generic strategies and improvement efforts that never transform the learning experiences or outcomes of many students.
3. **Rethinking equity** – Equity means more than equal rights and equal distribution of resources. Work on equity has to ensure that all students receive the rights and protections guaranteed in law, and it has to address the distribution of valued resources like funding, rigorous educational opportunities, and highly effective teachers and educational leaders. Too often however, efforts to address legal and distributive equity are undermined by the beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and institutional structures and norms that underlie, support, and in fact, contributed to inequities in the first place. As a consequence, transformative approaches to equity that examine those underlying beliefs and structures are also required.
4. **Rethinking what it means to “lead for equity”** – The equity warrior can be an inspiring figure, but in too many cases equity warriors are isolated individuals who manage to win a few battles but then are forced to give up the fight or move along before they can achieve their ultimate goals. Superintendents and others inside and outside their communities need to find and create ways to come together to exercise collective leadership for equity that fosters and sustains the common commitment and collaborative work that can address the social, cultural, economic, and political issues that transcend district boundaries.

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Appendix A: Member District Demographics

	DFG ⁴	# of Schools	Grades Served	Student Population	Percent Receiving Free and Reduced Price Lunch	Ethnic Demographics	
District A	I	4	K-8	1820	3%	Hispanic	4%
						Black	3%
						White	86%
						Asian	7%
District B	GH	17	Pre-K-12	14,000	12%	Hispanic	9%
						Black	9%
						White	30%
						Asian	52%
District C	A	30	Pre-K-12	20,700	81%	Hispanic	65%
						Black	24%
						White	9%
						Asian	2%
District D	n/a	4	K-12	350	84%	Hispanic	19%
						Black	81%
District E	GH	6	9-12	11,715	6%	Hispanic	6%
						Black	4%
						White	82%
						Asian	7%
District F	I	9	K-12	7,500	6%	Hispanic	7%
						Black	5%
						White	75%
						Asian	13%
District G	GH	10	Pre-K-12	4,764	26%	Hispanic	24%
						Black	14%
						White	56%
						Asian	5%
District H	FG	6	Pre-K-12	5,700	26%	Hispanic	22%
						Black	21%
						White	31%
						Asian %	27%
District I	FG	7	K-12	4,000	7%	Hispanic	12%
						Black	2%
						White	76%
						Asian	10%

⁴ New Jersey uses a “district factor group” (DFG) designation to group districts according to their community’s socioeconomic status, based on a formula that takes into account indicators like income, poverty, parents’ levels of education, population density, and unemployment

	DFG	# of Schools	Grades Served	Student Population	Percent Receiving Free and Reduced Price Lunch	Ethnic Demographics	
District J	B	13	Pre-K-12	5,000	44%	Hispanic	13%
						Black	30%
						White	55%
						Asian	2%
District K	I	8	Pre-K-12	5,400	5%	Hispanic	6%
						Black	11%
						White	75%
						Asian	8%
District L	DE	4	K-12	2,112	23%	Hispanic	24%
						Black	3%
						White	50%
						Asian	23%
District M	I	9	K-12	6,200	18%	Hispanic	24%
						Black	3%
						White	50%
						Asian	23%
District N	I	5		2,200	<1%	Hispanic	5%
						Black	1%
						White	79%
						Asian	15%
District O	J	10		9,700	3%	Hispanic	5%
						Black	6%
						White	40%
						Asian	49%

Appendix B: Evolutions of the Network's Theory of Action

December, 2009

In order to develop the community of practice, and, ultimately, contribute to the improvement of student achievement in participating districts, the Network is designed to:

- Develop a community of practice to enhance participants' abilities as change agents and lifelong learners.
- Capitalize on intellectual diversity and interpersonal connections.
- Provide opportunities for superintendents to collaborate in observing and analyzing instructional practice in K-12 classrooms.
- Promote participant understanding of how to initiate and sustain improvements in instructional practice in their own districts.

By participating in this community of practice, superintendents are expected to develop their understanding of key issues of teaching and learning, which will then contribute to an increased focus of instruction in their districts, and ultimately, improvements in student achievement for all students, particularly students of color and students living in disadvantaged communities.

March, 2009

IF we engage New Jersey superintendents in a sustained effort to build a community of practice that:

1. focuses on the instructional core (the interrelationship of teacher and students around content);
2. involves the disciplined use of instructional rounds in a variety of school settings;
3. provides learning experiences that address the adaptive and technical challenges of system-wide improvement efforts for ALL students in ALL classrooms,

THEN members of the NJNS Community of Practice will have demonstrably enhanced their own expert capabilities to observe and analyze the instructional core, and they will have increased their knowledge, skill, and disposition to apply this learning to improving the educational outcomes of ALL students in ALL classrooms in their school systems.
ALL MEANS ALL.

August, 2009

WHEN superintendents make an active and sustained commitment to the New Jersey Network of Superintendents and together with the Network design team develop a community of practice by

1. deepening their understanding of the instructional core (the interrelationship between teachers and students around content);
2. identifying and articulating productive and genuine problems of practice related to the instructional core
3. developing, using, reflecting upon, and refining a theory of action related to the instructional core
4. using rounds to observe the instructional core, carry out their theory of action and address their problem of practice . . .

THEN they will sharpen their own perception of instructional practice within their own districts, use instructional rounds and related practices within their own districts, and in the process improve the quality of teaching and learning in ways that result in improved outcomes for all students – ALL MEANS ALL.

September, 2009

WHEN superintendents make an active and sustained commitment to the New Jersey Network of Superintendents and together with the Network design team develop a community of practice by

1. deepening their understanding of the instructional core (the interrelationship between teachers and students around content);
2. developing, *applying*, reflecting upon, and refining *individual theories* of action related to the instructional core
3. identifying and articulating productive and genuine problems of practice related to the instructional core *and their theories of action*
4. using rounds to observe the instructional core, carry out their *theories* of action and address their problems of practice . . .

THEN they will sharpen their own *acuity for observing* instructional practice within their own districts, use instructional rounds and related practices within their own districts, and in the process improve the quality of teaching and learning in ways that result in improved outcomes for all students – ALL MEANS ALL.

September, 2010

Leading for the improvement of the instructional core to advance equity and excellence for all students.

In pursuing this theme, we will focus on the following topics and the links between them:

- Instructional core
- Equity and excellence
- Systems
- Leadership
- (Organizational) Culture

September, 2011

WHEN the New Jersey Network of Superintendents, as a community of practice, deepens its learning about the instructional core and achieving equitable outcomes for all students and identifies high-leverage Problems of Practice (POP) related to equity and the instructional core . . .

. . . and WHEN the Network provides ongoing support to attack these POPs to impact and influence instructional improvement . . .

THEN the Network members' strategic leadership decisions and actions will accelerate improvement of the instructional core and advance equity and excellence in their school districts for all students: All means All.