



Networks as Communities of Practice



Achieving excellence and equity

The vision of the Education State is to build an education system that fosters excellence and improves outcomes for every child and young person in every community, regardless of background, circumstances or postcode.

A key element of Education State reform is the regional operating model of place-based service delivery called 'Learning Places', designed to improve the level of support provided to schools and local communities. Networks play an important role within Learning Places as they are at the heart of implementing the Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO). Schools helping each other to improve is a powerful and sustainable approach to school improvement.

The best education systems in the world are highly networked¹. These successful education systems have principals who are well connected to their peers through active partnerships or learning networks of schools. These learning networks are known as 'Communities of Practice'.

Central to Learning Places is the need for strong partnerships with families and communities through other departments and agencies, local government and business to create a highly networked system. This approach requires a focused effort to strengthen the transitions at each stage of the learning journey, through early childhood, schools and post schooling pathways, to create an inclusive system.

Area Executive Directors, Senior Education Improvement Leaders (SEILs) and the multidisciplinary area-based teams provide support to schools, networks and principals to lift performance through enhanced curriculum resources such as FISO 2.0, strengthened accountability processes such as Peer Review, and targeted professional learning for teachers and school leaders through the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership (the Academy).

1. Farrar, M. (2015). Learning together: The power of cluster-based school improvement, Centre for Strategic Education Paper 246; Hargreaves A, Halasz G, & Pont, B. (2007). School leadership for systemic improvement in Finland, OECD Study Report; Hargreaves, A. (2011 Leading a self-improving school system.) National College for School Leadership.

Previous to Learning Places, our experiences of networks varied. Some principals had been engaged in vibrant learning networks and we wanted that spirit and endeavour to continue and to spread.

'... collaboration combined with strong learning purpose, professional excellence and collaborative system leadership, can achieve powerful long-term effects'²

By taking a Communities of Practice approach to the professional learning of principals and school leaders in networks, we deepen the maturity of our system through our commitment to each other and the learning progress of all students.

There is no doubt, the last two years have tested the resolve of all people at every level of the education system. Faced with unprecedented challenges, leadership has never been more complex, more public and more necessary. While we feel the full weight of community expectations, we rely on each other through our schools, networks and region for support; collaborating, partnering, seeking advice, using the wisdom of the team and individuals, all the while knowing that we are in new territory.

The purpose of this communication is to describe how we can work together to embed a networked system of schools to powerfully lift the performance and achievement of all students. The core remit of school leaders does not change during adverse times, it becomes even more critical.

A well connected and networked system of school leaders is unique in Victoria.

As leaders, we take the opportunity to model the types of professional practises that we want to see in our schools:

- > **collaboration** and collective responsibility for all learners
- > **use** of data and evidence to select the most effective improvement strategies
- > **evaluation** of the impact on student learning
- > **professional** learning to improve expertise
- > **reducing** variability of performance within and between schools.

School principals within a geographic network coming together and adopting a Communities of Practice (CoP) approach, using the Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO 2.0)) to drive improvement.

Each network has at its core, an unrelenting focus on improving student outcomes. They engage in relevant, purposeful and sustained learning and action, informed by evidence, with the aim of achieving excellence and equity and improved wellbeing.

The following pages give some structure and substance to this. This year is about implementing our improvement efforts with depth and precision, innovation and creativity, and through the evaluation of our impact on student outcomes. Together we are building a world-class networked system that reflects collective responsibility, passionate enquiry and high performance.

“When you enlarge your world laterally within your own level of the system, and vertically across levels, you gain ideas and perspective. When many people do this, you literally change the very context (for the better) within which you work. Networks get you out of your own narrow world.” (Fullan, 2005)

2. Bentley, T., and C. Cazaly. "The Shared Work of Learning: Lifting Educational Achievement through Collaboration." Mitchell Institute Research Report No 03/2015 Mitchell Institute for Health and Education Policy and the Centre for Strategic Education, Melbourne, 2015, www.mitchellinstitute.org.au



Collaboration in the Education State

This document focuses on how we work together to deepen school-to-school collaboration and foster the opportunity for every principal to belong to a dynamic local network and engage in a community of practice. Each network focuses on examining evidence that leads to improvements in professional practice and, ultimately, enriched outcomes for all students, regardless of background, circumstances or where they live.

Networks: implementing a Communities of Practice approach

Successful systems support their principals, school leaders and teachers to be well connected with their peers through active partnerships and productive learning focused networks of schools.

Through geographic networks operating Communities of Practice (CoP) approaches, we create highly effective, system-wide professional learning that:

- **promotes** the moral purpose to ensure that within our schools, all young people become creative, adaptable, self-directed learners who achieve their potential
- **enriches** educational leadership and collaboration, so all education professionals develop progressively together
- **develops** higher levels of expertise to improve student outcomes
- **sustains** and values professional learning for all education professionals
- **is** built on collaborative, enquiry-based practice where data is shared, and evidence drives learning and action
- **focuses** on the two outcomes and five core elements in the Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO 2.0), and engages in relevant, meaningful, purposeful and sustained learning and action, informed by evidence to achieve excellence in student learning and wellbeing outcomes.

Networks engage in the shared work of learning and wellbeing by:

- **sharing** their collective expertise and evidence-based practice
- **committing** to effective and challenging peer review to drive the improvement in each other's schools
- **learning** through inquiry into the impact of selected interventions
- **developing** a sharp focus for improvement efforts through joint project work on the two outcomes and five core elements of the FISO 2.0.

Principals also use the network activity and their experience to embed practises that reach into their schools and communities. Collaboration is used systematically to accelerate improvement across their network by mobilising teachers, students, parents and community partners.

Collaboration across schools is not limited to the traditional leadership positions — it occurs across all levels to improve student outcomes.

The *Framework for Improving Student Outcomes 2.0* comprise 2 outcomes of learning and wellbeing and 5 core elements of:

- Leadership
- Teaching and learning
- Assessment
- Engagement
- Support and resources

Underpinning the elements are 10 dimensions that indicate priority areas of practice to improve students' learning and wellbeing.

FISO 2.0 has been simplified and streamlined to enable schools to focus on what matters most to improve every student's learning and wellbeing outcomes.



Diagram 1: Frameworks for Improving Student Outcomes 2.0



“Leaders support each other to reduce classroom variability by creating collaborative professional practices with each other’s school, sharing data and evidence and strengthening collective effort for improvement.”

Most principals find schools to collaborate with on their selected element within a geographic network. However, SEILs and Area Executive Directors support principals and school leaders to collaborate across networks or area boundaries, should that be necessary, to support and strengthen their improvement strategies. Scaling and differentiation of evidence informed practice and excellence across the system is a major challenge that can be addressed through disciplined collaboration.

Principals and school leaders support each other to reduce classroom variability by creating collaborative professional practices with each other’s school, sharing data and evidence and strengthening collective effort for improvement.

Networks are supported by their SEILs and a suite of resources from the Academy to evaluate their current network activity, and to strengthen those elements of practice to align to the CoP approach. Adopting a CoP approach within networks enriches the shared learning experience and keeps the focus on evidence for continuous improvement. SEILs and network chairs are trained in how to develop a CoP approach through the WISE - System Leaders’ Program at the Academy and work with their networks to embed the approach.

It is expected that networks meet at least once a term to facilitate continuous learning and improvement. Groups using a CoP approach and focused on FISO 2.0 priority areas may occur more frequently as principals incorporate time to meet to support improvement in their schools. These groups determine whether other school leaders and teachers need to meet, and the frequency of meetings to drive improvement.

Network Chairs can access support for professional learning, administration, CRT, and catering up to \$5000 for local initiatives.

Networks adopting the CoP approach create a compelling space for principals and school leaders to learn together, focus collectively on investing in evidence-based strategies to implement the FISO 2.0, and share best practice to drive improved learning outcomes for students across Victoria.

Networks are closely supported by the area multi-disciplinary team, who are available to respond to the needs of principals, such as supplying relevant information or resources to support collaborative practice and knowledge sharing.

Network chairs: role, appointment and support

Networks are a key component of the Education State reforms, and we acknowledge the system leadership role of the network chair through investment in training, support and the role of Principal Reference Groups (PRGs) in regions.

A principal class member from within the network chairs each geographic network. The role of the network chair is to:

- provide leadership for the network, playing a lead role in setting the network's agenda and vision, in collaboration with the network SEIL/s
- drive a CoP approach to network activity that has a central focus on FISO 2.0, through shared data and accountability, collective responsibility and rigorous evaluation of the impact of improvement strategies on student outcomes
- provide opportunities for the network to discuss the implementation of other DET student-related policy and practice e.g. transitions, inclusion, etc., and shared operational matters such as OHS, facilities and staffing issues as required
- facilitate opportunities for the network to engage with the broader school and local communities and key partners across the government, business and community sectors to improve student outcomes
- collaborate with SEILs and other area-based multi-disciplinary team members on behalf of the network as required, facilitating two-way communication, consultation and feedback between the Department and network schools
- represent the network as a member of the region's Principal Reference Group (PRG)
- undertake succession planning for the network chair position in collaboration with the network SEIL/s.

The appointment of the network chair is managed through the network itself, supported by the network SEIL/s. The selection process is open and transparent, with expressions of interest sought. Guidance for this process is made available to networks through SEILs.

It is recognised that the role of network chair requires additional time and commitment from principals. The Department invests in capacity building opportunities for network chairs to ensure the strongest possible school network contribution to improvement efforts.

The Academy provides a range of CoP support material and resources, as well as the Education State leadership initiative WISE - System Leaders program. This initiative includes professional learning, support and incentives for principals to take on the role of network chair, and to implement the CoP approach.



Role of school education improvement leaders in networks

SEILs are a conduit for geographic networks and have an important role to play in facilitating, connecting, integrating and challenging to ensure effective network practice.

They assist networks to adopt an effective CoP approach and ensure the network sufficiently focuses on FISO implementation.

SEILs also provide similar support to smaller element-specific CoPs where required.

They are well placed, for instance, to identify smaller networks beyond the geographic network or area boundary that can be joined up to learn from and work with each other.

SEILs act as a bridge between networks and the rest of the Department. Their role includes:

- connector - brokering relationships between schools, and key experts to help networks nurture their strengths, bridge areas of development and pursue greater opportunities
- integrator - maintaining information- sharing relationships within networks and with other networks, ensuring clarity and broader sharing of practice
- facilitator - focusing on enabling thriving conversations between and among your network's members and stimulating interest within networks to ensure member engagement
- challenge partner - engaging networks in challenging conversations about evidence, exemplary practice, accountability and transparency, information sharing, and a focus on FISO 2.0 delivery.

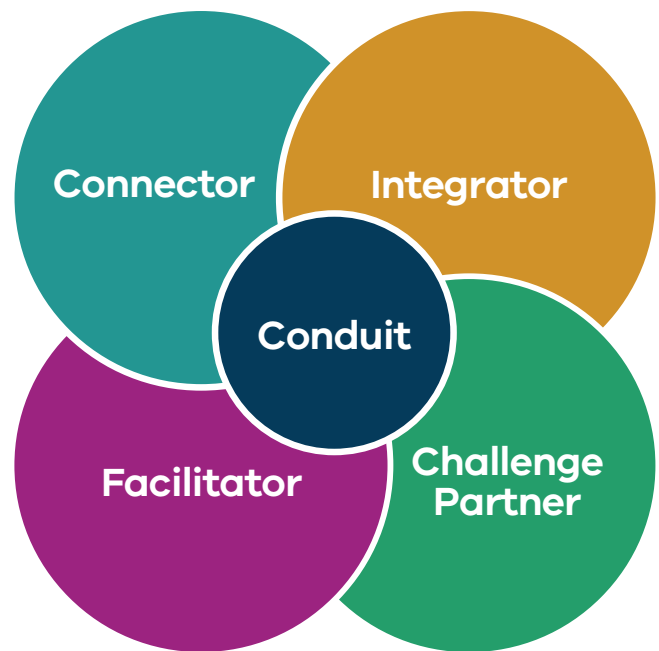


Diagram 2: Role of a SEIL in CoP approach

The regional operating model is serving us well during these difficult times. We are now a more mature system collaborating with each other while acknowledging our different roles, at every level of our system. We continue to work in complementary and supportive ways to focus on the learning and development needs of all children and young people in our schools.

While the pandemic presents significant challenges, we take the opportunity to build on our strengths and rise to these by being adaptive and agile leaders. We are 'working smarter together than harder alone' and will continue in this way for the betterment of all.

