Using a longitudinal mixed method approach to evaluate a professional development community: A case study of the Forum for Western Pennsylvania School Superintendents

Keith Trahan, Cara Ciminillo, Cindy Tananis, and Justin Rodgers, November 2009
Superintendents Forum of Western Pennsylvania

- Began in 1994
- Modeled after the National Superintendents forum (Danforth Foundation)
- Focused on professional development and networking for school leaders/CEOs
  - 50 members across half of Pennsylvania
  - Concern for representation of females and minorities
  - Desire to bring together forward thinkers and cutting edge practice
- Foundation funded
- Two meetings each year, 2.5 days each
Superintendents Forum of Western Pennsylvania

- Still up to 50 members, diverse membership
- Meet twice a year with more contact through electronic networking and some team and committee meetings
- Serve as a support network for University superintendent development program
- Self-funding through membership fees and staff support from University of Pittsburgh
- Collective activities may occur throughout the year
Shifting Over Time - Originally

- Whole-group focus
- Professional development
- Networking
- Small seed money funding for associated projects
- Refining practice
- Evaluation of meetings and small initiatives
Shifting Over Time - Currently

- Multi-group focus
- Professional development and growing leaders
- Networking
- Advocacy
- Shaping policy
- Evaluation of development, advocacy, impact, growth
Evaluation Strands

• Development and refinement of a Forum logic model (CEAC and Forum Leadership)
  ✓ What is the flow from agenda through activity to impact?
  ✓ What indicators of impact do we expect to change?
  ✓ How will we know?
  ✓ Where are the priorities for evaluation?

• Focused impact studies (CEAC)
  ✓ Advocacy for Children and Youth
  ✓ Professional Learning Community
  ✓ Voice for Public Education

• Documentation and Publicity (Forum)
  ✓ Advocacy for Children and Youth
  ✓ Professional Learning Community
  ✓ Voice for Public Education

• Online evaluation of meetings with reports (CEAC)
The role of evaluation in developing program theory:
Using retrospective logic modeling to tell a program’s story
Development and refinement of a Forum logic model

Mission:

The Mission of The Forum for Western Pennsylvania School Superintendents is to advocate for children and youth and empower superintendents in Western Pennsylvania to become masters of the profession with a voice for excellence and equity in public education.

We will accomplish this by engaging in sustainable partnerships among business, education, government and communities and by identifying and implementing best practices.

ARTICLE I – NAME AND PURPOSE

Name: The name of this organization shall be The Forum for Western Pennsylvania School Superintendents

Purpose: The Forum for Western Pennsylvania School Superintendents (The Forum) is a leadership organization that was formed to advocate for children and youth; to increase public awareness of the issues facing public education; to support and conduct research, educational and informational activities to increase public knowledge about the plight of children and youth; to provide research and information to foundations and corporate philanthropic programs that fund the needs of school leaders as they advocate for children and youth; to sponsor reports, meetings and workshops consistent with the requirements of children and youth; and to educate the public about the funding needs of schools and other organizations that provide services or advocacy for children and youth.

ARTICLE II – MEMBERSHIP, DUES AND LEADERSHIP

Section 1: A current member, in good standing, of The Forum for Western Pennsylvania School Superintendents, shall nominate applicants for membership in The Forum using a form or procedure issued by the Executive Committee.

Section 2: Membership or termination of membership shall be decided by a majority vote of The Forum’s Executive Committee.

The Executive Committee shall have the right to deny the membership of any prospective candidate for The Forum or
Development and refinement of a Forum logic model
Development and refinement of a Forum logic model

The mission of The Forum for Western Pennsylvania School Superintendents is to advocate for children and youth and empower superintendents in Western Pennsylvania to become masters of the profession with one voice for excellence and equity in public education.

- Purpose
- Strategies
  - Action and advocacy
  - Professional development
- Identifying and implementing best practices
- Organizational Structure
- Meetings of Members
  - Special session
  - Fall
  - Spring
- The Forum as a representative organization of leading advocates of public education
- The Forum engaging a network of sustainable partnerships
  - Business
  - Education
  - Communities
  - Government
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- Advocacy for children and youth
- Voice for excellence in education
- Professional learning community
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- Advocacy for children and youth
- Voice for excellence in education
- Professional learning community
- Increase public awareness of the issues facing public education
- Provide research and information to foundations and corporate philanthropic programs about the needs of school leaders
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The Mission of The Forum for Western Pennsylvania School Superintendents is to advocate for children and youth and empower school leaders in Western Pennsylvania to become masters of the profession with one voice for excellence and equity in public education.

- Advocate for children and youth
- Support and conduct research and activities that increase public knowledge about the plight of children and youth
- Sponsor reports, meetings, and workshops that advocate for children and youth

Professional learning community

- Leadership organization
- Professional development
- Engaging a network of sustainable partnerships
- Engaging members in a visionary professional learning community that enhances advocacy for student success in the 21st century

Voice for excellence in education

- Increase public awareness of the issues facing public education

Provide research and information to foundations and corporate philanthropic programs about the needs of school leaders
MISSION

Professional Learning Community

Voice for Excellence

Advocacy for Children and Youth
Telling the Forum’s membership story: Portraying change using the basics of Geographic Information Systems (GIS)
Geographic Information Systems (GIS)

• Variety of GIS programs available: free and for purchase
  – ArcGIS: $$$$$$ and *****
  – Diva-GIS: Shareware

• GIS programs have 3 mandatory files:
  1. Shape file (.shp) – The actual geometric shape: Map of PA
  2. Database file (.dbf) - The information related to the map: Names of Districts, Superintendents, or ID numbers
  3. Shape index file (.shx) – The “connection” file

• Remember that all three files must be the same name and in the same location: Think HTML
Editing a Database File (.dbf)

- To add additional data to a map, add information to the Database file
- Using combination of Microsoft (MS) Access and Excel.
- MS Excel is easy-to-use but, unfortunately, cannot save as a “.dbf” file.
Using Excel

• When using Excel, there are a few things to keep in mind.
• First the header row.
  – For the header row it is important to never have special characters, such as spaces (instead use the underscore) or #.
  – Do not use more that 11 total characters.
• Second, after adding all the data it is important to save it as a Comma Separated Value file (.csv) which can be read by Microsoft Access.
• When adding data, **never sort the file.** GIS reads the information based on the line, not the actual information.
• The manual for DIVA-GIS cautions you to never add or delete existing rows.
Using Microsoft Access

• MS Access is only used to flip the file to (.dbf).
• How to flip the file:
  • Check it first!
    – Open the Comma Separated Value (.csv) (aka Comma Delimited) file in MS Access, click next, and then make sure that the “First Row Contains Headers” box is checked
    – Click next, and go through the recently added data columns, making sure all numerical data have the data type of “Double” and not “Text”
    – Click finish
  • Then, save it!
    – Go to the “External Data” tab, find the sub-heading “Export” and click “More”
    – Select “dBASE file”
    – For Diva-GIS select “dBASE IV” file format
    – Browse to where you want to save the file
    – Save it!
You can specify information about each of the fields you are importing. Select fields in the area below. You can then modify field information in the 'Field Options' area.

Field Options

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<th>Field Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>FORUM_PART</td>
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Indexed: No

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<tr>
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<table>
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<tr>
<td>AVVTS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Database File

• Some things to remember about “.dbf” file you just created:
  – The file name **must** be the same as the shape “.shp” and shape index “.shx” files
  – Since the new database file must be in the same folder as the old one, **if you want to keep the old version move it or else it will be overwritten!**
  – The folder must contain the big three for GIS to work: “.shp”, “.shx”, and “.dbf”
Using Diva-GIS

• First step, add a layer
  – Browse to the folder containing the big three
  – Open the shape file, “…shp”
  – The map should look the same as before

• On the left, right click on the box that contains the name of the shape file and select “properties”

• Here the map can be color coordinated in many ways, but what we are concerned with is the “classes” tab
Using Diva-GIS: Classes

• Important!
  – This is why the format of proper columns must be “double” (from our previous MS Access step), the classes tab can only sort by numeric data

• Choose the numeric field (we used “FORUM_PART”) and the number of classes (we used “2” when sorting by just participants, and “4” when sorting by the different lengths of time of participation).
  – Since our data was assigned by us, we attributed each category a number (such as 1 for long-time, 2 for short-time, and 3 for middle-group participation).

• Click “reset the legend” to make changes to number of classes

• Assign each number (category) a color: you can also use ranges of numbers for complex data
  – Click the gray box beside the range, pick a color, and pick a style of fill
Arc-GIS

• Works similarly to Diva-GIS, But $$$$$
• Thus comes with lots of bells and whistles (i.e., additional tools, settings, etc.)
• Method used to edit the database file also works with Arc-GIS
  – May be easier depending on how much you need to edit and add to the file
  – We were working with only 30-50 school districts out of 501; much easier, just find the district and enter data on that line
• Can “join” with Excel files and automatically line up the data sets properly
  – However, to do this, there must be a column in the Excel file which will match up to a column in the database file
  – For us, this was the school district name, but remember:
    **The data, whether numerical or text, must match up exactly,** otherwise the data will not be added (we had several issues with spelling mistakes, alternate spellings and the addition or lack of hyphens)
• When saving after doing this way, the original database will not be changed, rather only the data in the newly created project will contain the data
Map Indicating Forum Membership: 2000
Map Indicating Forum Membership: 2007
Map Indicating Duration of Membership: Spring 2009

Legend:
- Long-Timers
- Middle Group
- New-Comers
Mini-Grant Sponsored Initiatives: Building on the Collective Wisdom of Colleagues
Superintendents Forum Initiative Program, 1997-2007

- Approximately 36 district and multi-district programs
- $4000 “mini-grant,” on average
- Innovative initiatives with wide ranging goals
- Mini-grants served as “seed money”
Using the Initiative Funds

Larger grants to partnering districts and shared initiatives

Connections with other regional initiatives: School Performance Network, Mon Valley Education Consortium, Math and Science Collaborative, EpiCenter, Tri-State Area School Study Council, IUs, others ....

Building a foundation in an individual district to develop capacity to partner with others
Reflecting on our past to plan for the future

What is our history with the initiatives that will help us move forward ...

Goals of Initiatives

- Superintendent as chief advocate for children and youth
- Engage stakeholders of community
- Assist superintendents in designing strategies that can be applied beyond the scope of a project
- Develop an agenda for children and youth
Commitment of Superintendents

Willingness to make a 3 year commitment to project planning, implementation, documentation and evaluation

Commitment to being a fully participating member of the planning, implementation and evaluation of the initiative (not simply delegated to staff)

Share with colleagues
Special Focus on Collaboration and Partnership

Forum’s mission related to regional impact; special consideration will be given to initiatives that seek to:

Build and maintain connections *with* other regional initiatives.

Build an infrastructure *within* an individual district to develop capacity to partner with other schools and regional initiatives.
Impact

Funded initiatives

Provide means for Superintendents to engage in advocacy

Provide collaborative space: initiative are developed with participation of community stakeholders

Provide evidence of member advocacy: required documentation, evaluation, and report
Examples of Initiatives

Classified into nine major themes

School readiness, pre-school age children’s: largely focused on provision of high quality early learning (8)

Community-building among students, educators, parents, and the public (7)

Tutoring focused on math and reading (6)

Also:

- Character education
- Extracurricular activities
- Socio-cultural diversity
- Parent involvement
- Infusion of technology
- Improved pedagogy.
Superintendents’ Special Interests

Mini-grants served as a foundation for special initiatives that became signature activities of school districts.

Extend district programming and directly affect the lives of young people.
Leveraging Mini-Grants

Used seed funds to secure complete funding for larger initiatives.

One Superintendent said, “A little money can turn into a great opportunity,” and in most cases Forum grants were the accelerant.

Over the life of the mini-grants, Superintendents estimate that the rather meager investment of $4,000 per initiative has leveraged millions in extended and sustained funding.
... and where do we want to go in the future?

Given what we have learned from the initiatives ...

Given what we have gained as a community of colleagues ...

What can we offer collectively to the region?

How can we impact the educational landscape of Western Pennsylvania?

How can we develop a capacity to Think and Act as a Region?
Organizational Evolution: Recognizing and Transferring Program Culture
Focused impact studies

Exploratory and descriptive research on Forum as a Community of Educational Practice and Action

- Forum “looks like” a *hybrid* of Communities of Practice/Action (Lave & Wenger, 1991) *and* Professional Learning Communities (Rosenholtz, 1989; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 1996)

- To explore the Forum as a community
  ✓ Conduct focus groups of specific membership sub-groups; “long timers” in Spring 08, “newcomers” in Fall 09
  ✓ Transitional group identified and focus group held
  ✓ Generate information about members’ experience and expectations of the Forum, with particular interest in changes in practice, action, or policy that might be resulting from or related to membership in the Forum

- Membership survey (at large). Results will be mapped to the research literature on Communities of Practice and Professional Learning Communities *and* with data gathered through focus groups
Evaluation Method

• Focus groups with members
  ✓ Long timers, Spring 2008 meeting
  ✓ Discussion around four primary prompts
    1. Early Years of Forum
    2. Compare current purpose of Forum to Its Early Years
    3. Further explore perspectives on evolution of the Forum, particular attention to balance of scholarly and practical focus.
  ✓ Newcomers, Fall 2008 meeting
  ✓ Discussion around seven primary prompts
    1. Prior knowledge of Forum before membership
    2. Experience compare with expectations
    3. More connection and discussion opportunities for superintendents
    4. Membership early versus later in career
    5. Role changes as experience grows
    6. Board relationship with regards to Forum
    7. Views on the Focus on Advocacy for Children and Youth in this organization

• Membership Survey
  ✓ Online survey sent to 75 Forum members
Findings from Long Timers Focus Group

1. Emphasis on community
   ✓ Forum was prestigious and membership was an honor
   ✓ Desire to work with other members
   ✓ Drive to honor school board’s commitment
   ✓ Culture
   ✓ Cross district and with institutions of higher education
   ✓ Capacity to influence policy

2. Professional Development
   ✓ Intellectual, scholarly and rigorous
   ✓ Evolution in leadership, scholarship and practice

3. Balance between scholarship and practice
   ✓ Practice focused, relationship based
   ✓ Advocacy, scholarship and application
Findings from New Comers Focus Group

Expectations
1. Networking
2. Opportunity to discuss current educational issues
3. Professional development

Experience
1. Networking
   ✓ Support
2. Opportunity to discuss current educational issues
   ✓ Refreshing to return to role as student
   ✓ Broad topics and range of members’ perspectives expands members’ thinking
   ✓ Deliberative space
3. Professional development
   ✓ High level and day to day

Benefits
1. Opportunity to explore broad topics
2. Networking, collaboration, collegiality
   ✓ Important to have new and experienced superintendents in the Forum
3. Few opportunities for professional development
4. Forum provides a needed voice of experience in education
5. Power of collective action
6. Opportunity to develop skills related to advocacy
Membership Survey Findings

Collaboration, collegiality, and opportunities to share rated as important and present characteristics of the Forum, though newer members perceive these opportunities as less present.

Mentoring, informal networking, and motivation to apply learned knowledge from the Forum increases in frequency among members with length of membership.

Superintendents consistently indicated severely limited opportunities to network with peers across the region. The Forum was a noted exception.

While all respondents indicated they can impact state and federal policy, there was less confidence that the Forum was providing them with the skills they needed, especially among newcomers. Confidence increased with length of membership.

Superintendents consistently report high levels of support from their Boards for their Forum membership, and often share information from the Forum with their Board members.
Membership Survey Findings

Reflecting on membership, most respondents see themselves taking on more leadership responsibilities as they continue membership in the Forum.

There are 2 distinct response groups related to when (and why) superintendents should be asked to join the Forum. One group suggested early membership would influence the development of leaders. The other group suggested that the Forum is a venue for higher-order professional development, requiring experience and stability, and the longer tenure allows for both a deeper appreciation for and contribution to the Forum. These groups were equally split among members.
The Mission of The Forum for Western Pennsylvania School Superintendents is to advocate for children and youth and empower superintendents in Western Pennsylvania to become masters of the profession with one voice for excellence and equity in public education.

-增加公众对公共教育问题的意识
-为教育界提供研究和信息
-代表组织领导，倡导公共教育
-支持并参与研究和活动，增加公众对儿童和青年的了解
-倡导儿童和青年
-建立一个可持续的学习社区
-领导组织
-专业发展
-与其他高等教育机构建立关系
-与其他大学建立关系
-与Pitt建立关系
-Superintendents as masters of the profession
-Engaging a network of sustainable partnerships
-Engaging community that enhances advocacy for student success in the 21st century
-领导力
-识别和实施最佳实践

Guiding well-informed policy and practice
### Superintendents Forum as Community of Educational Practice and Action (Hybrid PLC/CofP*)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Activity &amp; Culture</th>
<th>Mediating Practice Through Personal Perspective &amp; Organizational Policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formal</strong></td>
<td>Meetings: Semi-annual and committee Provide Time to reflect with colleagues Retreat setting Networking opportunity Sharing of research-based best practices</td>
<td>Individual Perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Member Forum K-12 Education General Public</td>
<td>Practice</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Informal</strong></td>
<td>Member collaboration, communications Provides Supportive and educative relationships with peers</td>
<td>Define educational and social problems Reframe function and practice of education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Cultural Characteristics of Forum Relationships (Formal & Informal)**
- Confidential
- Trust
- Collaboration
- Support
- Willingness to risk
- Unguarded authenticity

**Mediating Practice Through Personal Perspective & Organizational Policy**
- Increase understanding of role as advocate for children and youth
- Increase awareness of educational issues
- Identify educational and social research questions
- Define educational and social problems
- Reframe function and practice of education

**Organizational Policy**
- Adult Learning: Professional Development (Ex. Promoting PD related to ethical leadership)
- School Structural Issues: Teaching and Curriculum (Ex. Instituting character education programs within schools)
- Power and Politics: Relationships/Leadership (Ex. Supporting and fostering an ethical culture within education)
- Capacity Building: Strategic reform, Institutionalization, and Funding (Ex. Supporting and sustaining an ethical culture within education)
- Provide Research/Knowledge: Foundations and Decision Making (Ex. Generating knowledge that supports ethical leadership within education)
- Sponsor/Endorse Reports/Actions (Ex. Sponsoring and endorsing activities that promote ethical leadership in education)

*Highest level: Influence public to demand national/global change*

*Professional Learning Community [PLC] (Renzoltz, 1989); Community of Practice [CofP] (Lave & Wenger, 1991)*
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