



Turnaround Communities of Practice: Addressing the Urgency from *The State Role in School Turnaround: Emerging Best Practices*

Kelly Stuart, Julie Duffield, and Sylvie Hale

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About the Center on School Turnaround

The national Center on School Turnaround focuses on providing technical assistance to, as well as building the capacity of, states to support districts and schools in turning around their lowest-performing schools. The Center is led by WestEd in partnership with the Academic Development Institute, the National Implementation Research Network, and the Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education at the University of Virginia.

Focus Areas

- Developing SEA Staff Capacity and SEA Organizational Structures
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- Promoting Cooperative Labor-Management Relations
- Promoting the Use of Expanded Learning Time
- Creating Systems and Processes to Ensure a Pool of High-Quality Turnaround Partners
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- Engaging Families and Communities
- Building Political Will for Dramatic Change

Turnaround Communities of Practice: Addressing the Urgency

Kelly Stuart, Julie Duffield, and Sylvie Hale

with contributions by Anu Advani and Libby Rognier

Communities of Practice (CoPs) can be an important component of a state's turnaround-focused technical assistance efforts through peer-to-peer, face-to-face, and online collaborative activities within states, districts, and schools. CoPs play a vital role in responding to pressing, constantly evolving needs while building capacity and accelerating knowledge critical to the turnaround effort. Using CoPs provides states with a technical assistance approach to seek out solutions to the complex issues of school turnaround and gain support from stakeholders in implementing those solutions. When well implemented across state and within state, CoPs are positioned to serve as an important means to spread knowledge and expertise, build networks, develop collaborative solutions, and, ultimately, transform practice.

This chapter highlights the use of CoPs by states to collaborate with multiple stakeholders to strengthen technical assistance, curate best practices, and support the implementation of these practices within local district and school contexts. Below we review the salient literature on CoPs, describe a conceptual framework for SEAs to establish and support CoPs, provide examples, and offer key principles for action. Coupled, and perhaps integrated, with existing states' systems of support, CoPs have the potential to transform how states support their turnaround LEAs by increasing the SEAs' capacity to deliver technical assistance, disseminate key resources, develop networks, and foster collaborative relationships.

Review of Literature: What Do We Know?

The literature on communities and their utility in changing practice dates back several decades; however, steady evolution and growth in communication

technologies is rapidly changing the landscape of how CoPs can influence and sustain change. Below, we describe not only the concepts of CoPs, on- and off-line, but also the role technology can play in supporting how an SEA designs and delivers its technical assistance collaboratively for community members.

Research on CoPs has provided a conceptual understanding of how communities form and succeed. The concept of CoPs has its roots in the educational theory of situated learning. Early research (Lave & Wenger, 1991) referred to situated learning as communities where learning and practice work together in a social environment and rely on a collaborative novice/expert relationship. Later research (Wenger, 1998, 2002, 2011) examined the focus on relationships between individuals and the participation of people engaged in creating and sharing knowledge, as well as transforming practice.

The literature on CoPs and situated learning (Wenger, 1998) assert that people learn best in communities rather than as isolated individuals. Specifically, a community of practice is a group of people “who share a concern, a set of problems, or passion about a topic, and want to deepen their knowledge and expertise in an area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). Further, Wenger’s research (2002, 2009) describes three characteristics crucial to any effective CoP:

1. **The domain:** Members are brought together by a learning need they share. In the context of turnaround, the domain is to explore what works in turning around low-achieving schools and building capacity to implement change.
2. **The community:** The collective learning of the members becomes a bond among them over time with shared needs and goals.
3. **The practice:** The community interactions produce new knowledge and resources as well as offer problem solving and support for implementation.

An SEA-led community of practice may be created to solve problems, build collective learning, and, ultimately, share the effective practices to encourage wider adoption. The *domain* can be as broad as school turnaround or as specific as teacher and leadership pipelines. The *community* could include a specific workgroup (affinity group such as English learners), which has a shared identity and passion for its work and is bonded through the mutual need to learn. The *practice* focuses on intentional sharing and reviewing for understanding—examining which turnaround practices are working and for what reasons.

Most recently, Wenger et al. (2009) describe how technology has changed what it means for communities to “be together,” now that digital tools are part of most communities’ “habitats.” Habitats are not just a configuration of technologies, but also a dynamic, mutually defining relationship dependent on the culture of the community. Communities that exist online give educators access to human

and informational resources not available locally and provide the opportunity for new knowledge creation (Booth, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2010; Wang, Yang, & Chou, 2008). *Connect and Inspire* (Connected Educators, 2011)¹ calls for educators to be more than information experts; they must be collaborators in learning, seeking new knowledge and constantly acquiring new skills.

Online communities are at their heart “social learning spaces” (Booth, 2011; Schlager et al., 2009). However, as Booth highlights, the challenge for most online communities is recognizing that simply building a platform and inviting educators will not translate into productive communities. Virtual communities don’t just happen. Ameliorating the challenge of a “post and hope” community can be addressed by attending to consistent dimensions present in successful online communities. These include:

- *Collective identity and clear purpose* provide a common bond.
- *Leadership and effective moderation* build trust, make participants feel comfortable, and develop joint ownership.
- *Opportunities for sharing knowledge, expertise, and experiences* contribute to building capacity and knowledge as well as problem solving.
- *Governance structure and guidelines for participation* create norms and common agreements that guide participant interactions.
- *Community sociability and usability* help provide a sense of community through frequent and personalized communication.
- *Measuring success* establishes accountability and a feedback process to support further growth and learning.

Conceptual Framework for State-Initiated CoPs: A Blended Approach

With increased accountability, coupled with significant flexibility, now more than ever states play a crucial role in disseminating emerging and best practices on school turnaround. States have implemented major reforms to develop scalable solutions to human capital and operator capacity issues, creating conditions for success through policy change, assessing the quality of turnaround providers and operators, and investing in the information technology and accountability infrastructure that supports turnaround success (Kutash et al., 2010).

SEAs have numerous opportunities to leverage both in-person and virtual communication to maximize reach and impact through CoPs. There is no substitute for face-to-face meetings, but online connections can play a critical role before, during, and after in-person CoP convenings to delve deeper into topical areas, build collaborative relationships, and continue group learning. When CoPs emerge from or leverage face-to-face interactions, they are likely to grow (Nichani & Hung, 2002).

¹The Connected Educators website (<http://connectededucators.org/>) and associated publications offer resources, reports, and briefs that detail step-by-step support in understanding key components of effective CoPs, considerations for technology, how to lead a community, and how to measure the success of a community.

Research is evolving on this blended approach of in-person and virtual interaction for CoPs. Currently, Connected Educators is conducting ongoing design research on the intersection of online and face-to-face professional engagements across multiple contexts. The focus is on examining different levels of interaction or how to measure connectedness. Results of this research will inform future editions of *Connect and Inspire* reporting.

The table below illustrates a framework that identifies the major characteristics of CoPs, with questions for consideration to guide an SEA in establishing and supporting CoPs. This framework incorporates what is known about effective CoPs, both off- and online, and assumes the use of technology as applicable in responding to many of the *considerations* listed below.

Framework for Building and Maintaining SEA-Led Communities of Practice

Characteristic	Considerations
<p>Domain: the shared definition of the learning need that brings members together</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the shared interest of the community? What is the purpose for the group? • What do members hope to gain from sharing and social interactions?
<p>Community: the relationship that bonds the group around the collective learning, built over time through its members' regular interaction</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What level of interaction will facilitate community building? • Does the group have sufficient levels of trust and willingness to share to facilitate collective learning? How can the community ensure that all members feel a sense of belonging?
<p>Practice: the various community interactions to build a body of knowledge, including shared and produced learning activities, resources, and tools</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What interactions will best engage and meet the needs of the community? (e.g., workgroups, discussions, shared presentations, content development, and/or curation) • How can these learning activities lead to problem solving and change in practice? • What new body of knowledge results from the CoP for others interested in the same domain?

Characteristic	Considerations
<p>Venue: the setting(s) of the community's interactions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When, where, and how will community members interact? (e.g., in-person, virtual, synchronous, asynchronous, or a blended approach) • Which venues are most successful for this community, in terms of participation and productivity? • What types of interactions and exploration are best suited to various face-to-face and online environments?
<p>Success Factors: the components that support successful communities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will the following be defined, addressed, and maintained in the community? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identity and purpose ▪ Leadership and moderation ▪ Knowledge sharing and expertise ▪ Governance and protocols ▪ Roles and responsibilities ▪ Communication ▪ Accountability and feedback

As the sponsor of a community, the SEA provides or guides CoP leadership through a facilitation and moderation role. In addition, the SEA guides the curation and dissemination of critical content as well as offers consultations and technical assistance. The learning activities and venues might include exchanges via webinars and online convenings, in-person events, consultations, discussions, and social curation of content. The challenge is to go beyond the exchange of resources to engagement in deeper problem-solving and reflective conversations.

It is important to build joint ownership by defining specific roles within the community and opportunities to participate through explicit protocols and processes. It is through social learning that a community comes together, and this is the main differentiator between CoPs and task forces or teams. Recognizing that the SEA must be in partnership with LEAs in fostering the community, defined roles assist in keeping the community focused. Clear roles and responsibilities increase the possibility that the community can maintain and sustain changes in leadership as the responsibility is shared among key members. The Wenger-Tayners² suggest different *roles* within the community to enable distributed leadership and ensure joint ownership. For example, “*agenda activists*” in a school turnaround administrators’ CoP would take the lead in maintaining the community’s learning agenda based on issues, challenges, and opportunities

²Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner (<http://wenger-trayner.com>) are known for their seminal work on communities of practice and social learning theory, learning across boundaries, and the use of social media.

facing turnaround leaders. Other members might elect to be “*community keepers/connectors*” and take the lead in ensuring all voices are heard at the table and monitoring group interaction dynamics.

Potential for Communities of Practice

CoPs offer tremendous potential to transform low-performing schools. Through CoPs, an SEA can disseminate best practices and support capacity building. Bringing stakeholders together through their common need to share, implement, and evaluate practices holds great promise for transforming the lives of millions of students throughout the country. Wenger and his colleagues said it best:

A salient benefit of communities, in fact, is to bridge formal organizational boundaries in order to increase the collective knowledge, skills, and professional trust and reciprocity of practitioners who serve in these organizations. Because they are inherently boundary-crossing entities, communities of practice are a particularly appropriate structural model for cross-agency and cross-sector collaborations. (Synder, Wenger, & Briggs, 2003, p. 3)

Examples of State-Created Communities of Practice

SEAs are sponsoring different types of communities in order to support turnaround stakeholder needs to build connections between people, resources, and practice. Profiled below are three examples of communities which SEAs have created within their states to support school turnaround efforts:

- **Nevada SIG Group** highlights a combination of face-to-face and online communication to leverage expertise among the community of SEA and districts and to facilitate districts’ sharing of resources and practices.
- **Washington Leadership Network** provides an example of cultivating professional connections in an established online environment where state leadership shares responsibilities with districts to leverage resources and partner around practices.
- **Michigan DOE Partnership** focuses on convening CoPs to improve high school learning and engagement. These CoPs were developed over several years based on partnership model principles of leading by convening, coalescing around issues, ensuring relevant participation, and doing work together.

Nevada SIG Group

Nevada has two cohorts of SIG schools. Best practices and lessons learned from cohort one were used to inform and enhance the cohort two applications. The SEA connected SIG leaders in districts across the state to share successful practices for working with teachers’ unions, community outreach, and involving parents in the SIG proposal process. Nevada Department of Education (NDE) conducts regular in-person SIG conferences to bring districts with SIG-identified

schools together. Topics addressed during the meetings have included building high performing collaborative cultures, effective teaching, coaching partnerships and processes, family and parent engagement, STEM initiatives, and effective learning. State and national experts presented in their fields to attendees, including school and district leadership and classroom teachers. Through these meetings, NDE is brokering important peer-to-peer connections for the SIG implementers, as well as providing resources and training around common topics of interest.

During the 2011–12 school year, the NDE SIG director launched a Nevada-specific community space on the School Turnaround Learning Community web site (STLC) for the SIG schools to have ongoing access to updated school turnaround resources and to complement connections between face-to-face convenings. The STLC website offers resources, online training, and discussion tools enabling users to share school turnaround practices and lessons learned and facilitates networking to support schools more effectively. The STLC online platform allows for state-specific groups or workspaces for CoPs to curate their own resource collections as well as share their experiences.

This venue of a private community was employed to share Nevada-specific information on turnaround, important calendar dates, and host webinars specific to Nevada's turnaround needs. Webinar topics included the use of data and preparing for the Common Core State Standards in literacy. Nevada's group within the School Turnaround Learning Community provides a forum for ongoing communication among the Nevada SIG practitioners within a national site that highlights vetted resources and spotlights practices via large webinars to support two-way communication between the SEA and LEAs.

Washington Leadership Network

In December 2012, the Office of School and Student Success at the Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction launched a community in Edmodo³ for educators in Washington State to network, share ideas, collaborate, and explore best practices for improving student and school achievement. Led by two staff members reporting directly to the chief state school officer, this network is a resource for educators throughout the state to connect with other peers who are also focusing on the domain of improving student achievement. The purpose of this community is to gain insight into the challenges faced by schools working to meet goals and benchmarks and to share successful models and strategies that have worked, as well as to network and collaborate with educators from across the nation.

³Edmodo (<https://www.edmodo.com/>) is an educational social media platform for teachers, students, and parents. Uses include posting assignments and quizzes, creating polls for student responses, embedding video clips, creating learning groups, and creating a calendar of events and assignments. Students can also turn in assignments or upload assignments for their teachers to view, grade, and provide instant feedback. Edmodo houses many CoPs for teachers and students.

The State Role in School Turnaround

The Office of Student and School Success employed the following dissemination strategies to help educators learn about the network:

- Sent emails to school and district administrators and staff throughout the state inviting them to join the network.
- Leveraged Edmodo as the online platform with the Leadership Network as a component of the outreach presentation conducted at each of the nine Educational Service Districts throughout the state for identified schools and districts.
- Conducted conversations about the intent and vision of the network with Technical Assistance Contractors and School Coaches assigned to the Priority and Focus schools.

The network CoP facilitators quickly learned the importance of using focused conversations for affinity-based groups to address an issue-specific domain topic, as well as the need to support joint facilitation in enrolling other community members in the CoP. For example, one of the community members, the Director of Multilingual Programs of a district in western Washington, volunteered to conduct a focus group on English learners that offered educators throughout the state access to expertise and conversations about their individual needs. These kinds of focused conversations, generated from community members, are an essential ingredient in developing a network that focuses on members' needs and leverages social learning.

The Office of Student and School Success is continuing to implement its vision for using Edmodo to support CoPs through shared activities such as curating school turnaround resources. Building on their success, they plan to eventually launch an Emerging Schools group with the Office's Online Emerging School Coach to facilitate a conversation to support schools with this designation. The K-12 Director of Learning and Leadership plans to use Edmodo as a tool to help facilitate monthly meetings conducted with the Office's School Coaches and Technical Assistance Contractors. The use of Edmodo as a means to stay informed and connected will be a component of a statewide Teacher Leadership Symposium that the Office will facilitate during the summer. The Office will continue to seek partners and build joint leadership roles to support additional issue-specific groups for educators in Washington to share ideas, collaborate, and explore best practices for improving student and school achievement. Washington's Leadership Network demonstrates an example of an SEA building its state-specific network inside an existing larger educational online community space as a way to share resources, make connections between members, and a way for members to take on leadership roles to share their own challenges and promising practices.

Michigan DOE CoPs Partnership

In 2005, the Michigan Department of Education Office of Special Education and Early Intervention Services (OSE-EIS) collaborated with the IDEA

Partnership⁴ to support state leadership in Michigan. The state leaders formed a CoP, engaging a range of stakeholders to build capacity for secondary school redesign and prepare for the adoption of the new high school graduation requirements.

A pilot project, Reach and Teach for Learning, was designed to support middle and high school teams as they explored what it would take to assist their struggling learners, including their students with disabilities, to make progress in the general curriculum. The design team leaders of this CoP work group included state leaders and associations (Michigan Education Association—MEA, Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals—MASSP). The pilot was so successful that the sponsors wanted to continue deepening their learning and reaching out to the field to strengthen secondary school improvement.

Leisa Gallagher, Director of the Reaching and Teaching Struggling Learners (RTSL) initiative in MDE's Center for Educational Networking, attests that because state leadership learned how to relate according to what is now identified as the "Partnership Way"—leading by convening, coalescing around issues, ensuring relevant participation, and doing work together—these methods showed significant data improvements and smoothed the path for the creation of two major efforts in the MDE: the Superintendent's Dropout Challenge and a new mandated dropout prevention initiative funded by OSE-EIS for RTSL.

The Superintendent's Dropout Challenge currently reaches 1,800 elementary, middle, and high schools and was formally integrated into Michigan's 2012 ESEA Flexibility Waiver system, requiring Focus and Priority schools to participate in the Challenge. It was launched with the support of the original CoP partners who worked together from 2005–2008. It is a testament to the longevity of the community that, eight years later, the current Challenge CoP workgroup is staffed by several of the same colleagues who participated in the original IDEA Partnership learning community. The community workgroup includes former department members who participate on a voluntary basis; strong relationships and joint leadership have helped ensure the community's sustainability despite changes in formal MDE roles. This authentic engagement is a sign of a strong collective identity, effective leadership and moderation, and well-understood norms for community participation.

RTSL continues to partner with MASSP and has worked with two cohorts of secondary schools since its launch. RTSL and its success in increasing student achievement was highlighted on the PBS NewsHour.

Educators who are part of this state CoP ask themselves deep questions: "How is our personal identity engaged in the work? How can we share our difficult experiences to transform our schools and communities?" By learning with

⁴With the Office of Special Education Programs in USDE, the IDEA partner organizations form a community with the potential and intention to transform the way they work to improve outcomes for all students, especially students with disabilities. (<http://www.ideapartnership.org/>)

others, Michigan's state-level educators have formed a sustainable CoP which has expanded to address new school improvement domains.

Action Principles

Below we provide specific action principles as recommendations to get started with a community of practice, based on best practices shared in literature and examples in practice.

Build joint leadership and membership for active participation within the state

- Identify leadership roles and responsibilities and provide training and support to ensure effective facilitation and interactivity. (See Connected Educators for examples).
- Develop governance structures and guidelines for various stakeholder groups to contribute.
- Cluster members around a common identity (domain), purpose, and need.
- Utilize protocols to ensure participation among members for regular ongoing communication to problem solve on similar turnaround challenges.
- Focus on the work and recognize the importance of building trust among members; this will help build reciprocity between members.
- Include both the chief state school officer and the local community in the development process to help ensure different stakeholder sponsorship.

Implement peer-to-peer learning activities to further curate and communicate best practices

- Use the expertise, including tools and resources, of existing communities and regional and national technical assistance organizations to codify and disseminate best practices (e.g., The Center on School Turnaround, the State Implementation and Scaling Up of Evidence-based Practice Center [SISEP] at UNC, Doing What Works).
- Leverage resources and allow time for members to apply best practices in their own local context. Encourage sharing and analysis of successes and failures.
- Identify specific activities appropriate for the community by blending both synchronous and asynchronous collaboration to foster sharing of knowledge, expertise, and experiences, such as scheduled webinars, impromptu communications, discussions, and content development.
- Recognize that communities have different needs and evolve in a variety of ways, ranging from informal to formal.
- Remember a community is not website; it is the convening, coalescing around issues, ensuring relevant participation, and doing work together.

Resources

State Implementation and Scaling Up of Evidence-Based Practice Center (<http://sisep.fpg.unc.edu>) offers several tools and an Active Implementation Hub to assist stakeholders involved in active implementation and scaling up of programs and innovations. The site's goal is to increase the knowledge and improve the performance of persons engaged in actively implementing any program or practice and offers several protocols for engaging stakeholders in conversation.

The **Connected Educators** (<http://connectededucators.org/>) website and associated publications offer resources, reports, and briefs that detail step-by-step support in understanding key components of effective CoPs, considerations for technology, how to lead a community, and how to measure the success of a community.

IDEA Partnership Model: The Partnership Way. With the Office of Special Education Programs, USDE, the IDEA partner organizations form a community with the potential and intention to transform the way they work to improve outcomes for all students, especially students with disabilities (<http://www.ideapartnership.org/building-connections/the-partnership-way.html>). This work includes an online community site (www.sharedwork.org) that focuses on approaches fostering two-way communication, offering accessibility to all stakeholders, presenting the work through a community lens, and serving as a vehicle for inviting participation.

The **Center on School Turnaround** (www.centeronschoolturnaround.org) is part of a federal network of 15 Regional Comprehensive Centers, serving individual states or clusters of states, and seven national Content Centers. Together, the 22 Comprehensive Centers are charged with building the capacity of state educational agencies (SEAs) to assist districts and schools in meeting student achievement goals. Staff of the Center have years of experience in designing, launching, and facilitating online interactions, including CoPs. The Center is developing a comprehensive toolkit on CoPs that will complement this chapter.

The **School Turnaround Learning Community** (www.schoolturnaround-support.org) offers a platform to set up a state-specific group or workspace. The online space includes a number of features such as discussions, resource sharing, and a newsletter. States can host state-specific webinars, disseminate effective practices, and offer two-way communication between the state and districts. States interested in utilizing the STLC for their own work can contact info@schoolturnaroundsupport.org to request an initial discussion with STLC staff about their state needs and aspirations for leading a CoP.

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