Why a State Network Action Project?

BY SHERRY SWAIN

The state network is a National Writing Project structure intended to provide the glue that contributes to cohesion among the sites of a particular state. For a number of years, state networks have existed in Mississippi, Kentucky, Nevada, and California. Now five more states are planning networks. Site leaders from these states—Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Texas—met in Tucson in February to draft plans for the first year of their participation in the new NWP initiative, State Network Action Project (SNAP), which was developed to support statewide collaboration among sites. In the process of working together, the assembled leadership unearthed several themes that will play out in the coming months.

Individual sites in collaboration form the foundation of a state network. One theme of the Tucson retreat was the importance of using a state network to share and understand the work of each site. Janet Swenson, director of the Michigan network, said, "It was good to see everyone together because some [site leaders] hadn't met within their own states. Sites didn't realize how little they knew about each other's work within the state."

Indeed, site leaders within SNAP states displayed an intense desire to learn from other sites. The Louisiana Writing Project intends to hold collaborative statewide events, develop collaborative projects, and sponsor cross-site visitations. The Massachusetts Writing and Learning Network, which has three of its four sites led by new directors, plans to hold a brainstorming meeting to, among other things, design a joint publication and extend "statewide invitations to activities conducted by individual projects." Thus, for example, the workshop on workshops conducted as an advanced institute at the Boston Writing Project will be available to first- and second-year teacher-consultants from the three new sites. The Pennsylvania State Network wants to develop "working groups in and across sites to support the work of the network" and share "expertise across sites...." And finally, the National Writing Project of Texas has planned a number of state-level retreats, believing that "physical gatherings will help strengthen our infrastructure and provide settings in which our sites can evaluate our strengths and bolster each other's initiatives."

Leadership development is a function of state networks. Closely tied to the SNAP plans is an emphasis on leadership development, both for individual sites and for the network itself. Michigan has made leadership development a centerpiece of its state network vision. This summer, the network will hold its second three-day leadership retreat for teams from each site. Similarly in Louisiana, a fall retreat will bring together teams of directors and teacher-consultants from all sites to plan network projects. Consistent with its theory of the political nature of teaching, the Pennsylvania network aims to "develop teachers as leaders on policy committees in and across districts." Texas, as a new state network of new or nearly new sites, intends to generate a statewide database of teacher-leader expertise.

Acquiring a state network perspective requires a leap in thinking. Site-level thinking is familiar to local directors and therefore relatively easy. A network perspective is less familiar, and hence a challenge. In fact, much of the language used to respond to the exit survey at the Tucson retreat confirms the tentativeness of the state network undertaking. "I'm not sure how to imagine how a state network would change our future practice," wrote one participant. Other phrases underscore the speculative: "the expected effect ..., results that are "potentially extremely valuable," and plans that "envision only positive growth." Yet there remains a steady confidence in the state networks as entities for strengthening sites and for giving a statewide voice to the writing project. Tucson participants commented that the networks will bring in additional funding, provide more "clout" in state educational policymaking, and, over time, "increase in capacity, visibility, and vision."

While all the networks represented at the conference shared similar aspirations, participants recognized that each of the networks operates in a different education milieu. All may exist in an environment of similar standards, high-stakes assessments, and reform initiatives, but each works within a particular educational culture. This is the area in which the SNAP plans take slightly different paths. Prior to arriving in Tucson, each state team conducted a study of its state context. These studies led the teams to fashion goals and action plans with attention to issues in their states.

For example, a goal of the Louisiana network is to "[work] against racism and classism," so its action plan envisions increasing diversity in summer institutes and establishing a site at a historically black institution. The Michigan team plans in-depth documentation and inquiry projects focusing on teaching practices and student learning. Texas aims to prepare teachers to help students meet state standards because, "It's all about student outcomes in Texas." Another Texas goal, to retain teachers in the profession, speaks to the teacher shortage in that state. The Massachusetts network will establish an advisory board of educators, legislators, business people, and civic leaders. The Pennsylvania team plans to form relationships with a wide range of agencies and educational organizations, from the state legislature to the state school board, to broaden dissemination of information about the state network.

Leaving Tucson, SNAP participants recognized there would be months of revision, response, and sharing ahead. These leaders are learning, and they know that the knowledge they are creating will be useful, not only to themselves, but to other leaders who will someday travel down the state network road.

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