

Innovation Directors Network Meeting Summary: June 11-13, 2018

In June 2018, [The Learning Accelerator](#) (TLA) launched the inaugural convening of the Innovation Directors Network (IDN), an intentionally diverse group of 15 innovative leaders from 10 districts and 5 CMO's (representing over 800,000 students) across the country. This document summarizes key takeaways and findings from this convening to support follow-on discovery and action.

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IDN Background and Context

Purpose of the Network: TLA is a national nonprofit focused on catalyzing school transformation to ensure every child in the US has an equitable, engaging, and effective education. Over the last five years, TLA has worked to share and improve knowledge around the implementation and scaling of high-quality blended and personalized learning efforts. Through this work, and with feedback from leaders across the country, we've learned about the power and importance of networks for learning. However those trailblazing and leading innovative work within their respective systems often work in silos and lack opportunities for collaboration, which can constrain capacity and information sharing. TLA believes we need better ways to connect and push forward collective progress in our field by bringing together those who can influence change at scale. This core belief led TLA to launch the IDN as a solution to this issue.

Network Goals: Through convening a national network of 15 leaders, we aimed to achieve the following goals:

1. **Develop a community for innovative leaders** to share and improve practice as they scale their efforts.
2. **Collaboratively identify, test, and iterate on high-potential practices and strategies** to solve common instructional and system problems.
3. **Codify and disseminate learnings and strategies** across and beyond the network to advance collective knowledge and practice for the broader field.



Participants:

In launching the IDN, TLA sought to bring together a “job alike” group of school system leaders that were pursuing the common goal of bringing innovative teaching and learning strategies to scale in their respective districts or school networks. Participants were selected based on the following attributes:

- Strong personal leadership of sustained innovation work across multiple school sites,
- Diversity of background (experience, expertise, local context, etc.)
- Interest in developing and contributing to the broader national movement through a professional learning community.

For reference, here are links to the [Participant List](#) and [IDN Leader Lookbook](#).

Convening Format:

A key finding of TLA’s previous network-building work is that effective networks are built on a foundation of relationships and trust. For this reason, during the IDN convening, we spent considerable time on sharing stories about the personal drivers for their current work as well as on the challenges they are facing and lessons being learned. TLA hypothesized that by building shared understanding of these narratives, the IDN would have a stronger base and community upon which to engage with trust, empathy, and commitment as we moved forward-- a step that is vital to any successful network.

In order to reach that goal, the two day convening consisted of various activities to allow for authentic community building, collaboration, as well as identification and codification of ecosystem challenges folks in their positions are facing. Both days included fireside chats from external presenters around various insights on innovative practices (successes, failures, and learnings) and system level decisions (from the funder and leader perspective). This gave participants the opportunity to learn about alternative ways of looking at this work and understanding the movement from other vantage points.

Participants also participated in daily “un-conferences,” where their peers presented about a tangible resource, question, and/or projects they were working on. We paired the “un-conferences” with #storyoflearning presentations, where IDN participants shared a key challenge they faced and/or have been working through. These activities provided multiple touch points for the participants to bond and see each other as supports and resources.

Finally, the IDN engaged in multiple activities and design sessions to pull out personal challenges, district/CMO challenges, and even ecosystem challenges. These sessions allowed us to begin grappling with how to address these challenges in a strategic manner and what success might look like.

- Convening [Agenda](#)
- [Presentation](#)



Discussion Summary and Takeaways

The participant conversation, facilitated by TLA, sought to explore three main areas:

1. **Strengths of the Leaders:** What skills and/or supports do individuals in their roles need to push this work forward at scale?
2. **Ecosystem Challenges:** Including shared aims (both vital and/or solvable) that need to be addressed to create change.
3. **Collective action steps:** Identify priorities and potential steps forward utilizing the expertise in the room.

1. Strengths of the Leaders

The IDN participants are a unique and powerful group. As system leaders, they sit at the nexus of academic and operational change, leading efforts to seed, test, and scale innovative instructional approaches across schools in their district or networks. Their stories often offer critical insights about how they are successful in this work, and the challenges they face along the way.

In order to elicit these insights, we kicked-off day 1 with members of the IDN completing a “[window pane](#)” exercise to showcase strengths, current focus areas, supports, and challenges, both personally and within their own district or charter management organization (CMO). This exercise was paired with a reoccurring #storyoflearning segment where different members of the IDN shared challenges they currently face and/or have worked through in their role. Both of these activities were included to not only allow participants time to reflect and share about their own personal journeys and challenges, but to also begin building honest and open relationships between the participants. We believe that in order for the IDN to be successful, participants needed to not only see each other as colleagues but also friends that they can trust, respect, and lean on to really move this work forward together. By breaking down walls early, the IDN was also able to engage in honest and thoughtful conversations early on.

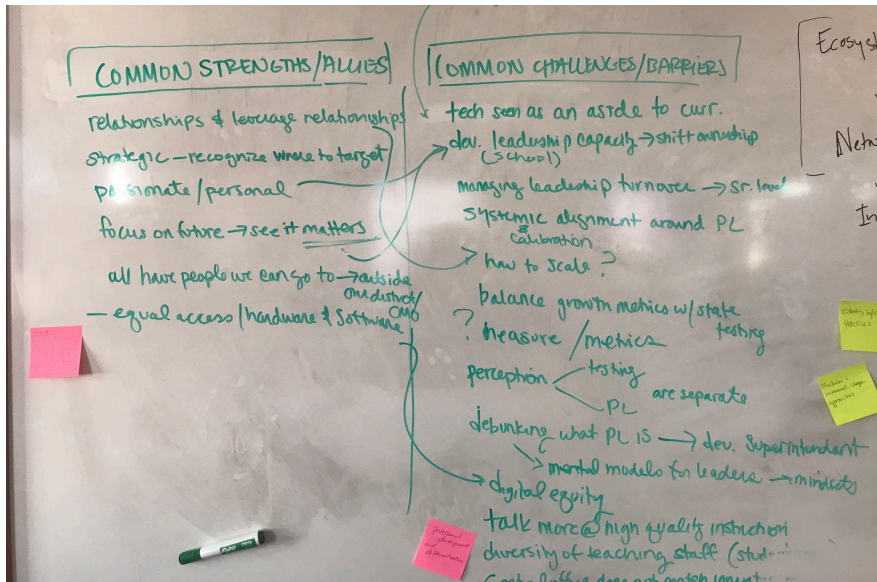
Looking across all of these conversations (window pane activity, group conversations, and #storyoflearning share-outs) some key patterns emerged around the competencies and capacities participants found to be critical to their success in driving innovative work. Beyond the necessary technical knowledge, these capacities can be considered essential ingredients for any leader in this type of role.



Critical capacities for system change leaders:

- **Relationship building** - *The ability to leverage and engage multiple stakeholders to build capacity and expertise of those within their network. To do this successfully, leaders need to see the work from multiple perspectives, by leaning on their own experiences, while also highlighting ways to engage participants on all levels in a thoughtful manner. When supporting their districts/CMOs, they also approach their work as a collaborative effort where they are a support and not an intruder. This is important because it builds a community around change as opposed to one individual attempting to spearhead innovation in isolation.*
- **Strategic thinking** - *The ability to recognize where and who to target when. Many times this means taking a step back and looking from the 30K level to identify low hanging fruit and paths of least resistance to get change moving (e.g. highlighting practice first and tech second or piloting/prototyping a big idea in bite-sized chunks). Support must match not only the need, but also who needs it, because that is where real buy-in and shared ownership happens.*
- **Future focus** - *The ability to see the long game and how all of the pieces work together in the short and long term to support larger change. To be successful leaders need to not get pulled down by daily challenges but instead focus on the ultimate goal they are working towards. Sometimes this means being optimistic in the face of adversity and/or giving stakeholders a clear vision of where the work is going to continue moving forward. This is critical to innovative change because it can take a long time, so focusing on the future and not being bogged down by the present is instrumental to successful implementation.*
- **Passion for mission** - *The ability to not only stay passionate about the big picture, improving education for all, but also to share that passion with those around them. This means seeing the ultimate goal and impact even small changes will make on the educational ecosystem as a whole. Each leader truly illustrates this by how they talk about their students, their network, and their community. This passion is contagious and can be a true catalyst for change.*
- **Ability to find and connect with with external supports** - *Knowing how to identify and connect with the right external supports is key for system leaders. It not only allows them to expand their own capacity and expertise but also build a network of supports to lean on when needed. These external supports can be professional service organizations, communities of practice, and even individuals-anyone who can lend a hand when leaders face challenges, barriers, and/or questions.*
- **Commitment to ensuring equitable access to technology** - *The ability to connect their district/CMO to essential infrastructure including internet, hardware, and software is vital for system leaders. Without ensuring equitable connectivity, it is difficult to successfully implement blended/personalized learning practices and innovation at scale.*

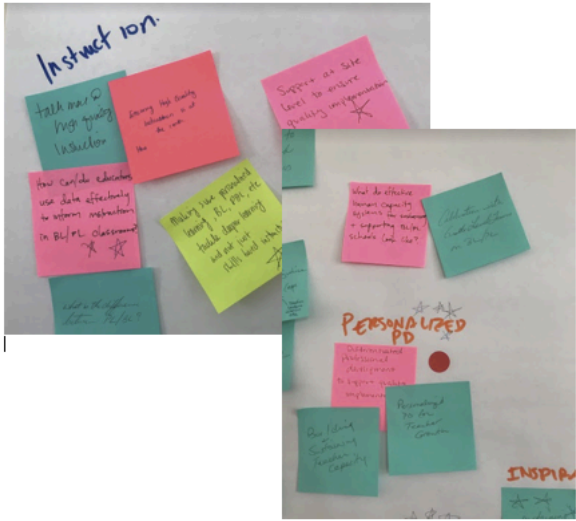




2. Ecosystem Challenges:

In addition to exploring the key individual strengths of those engaged in the IDN, another goal of this initial convening was to identify and map out potential areas of collective action around shared challenges. We used a four-part process to identify and map challenges, first asking individual participants to brainstorm and share from their personal point of view and systems (see these individual “brain dump” results [here](#)).

Leaders then looked across these challenges to highlight those cited across the group (view artifacts from this common challenges analysis [here](#)). The challenges leaders felt were particularly important are outlined below. We then looked across the challenges to cluster them into common themes or “buckets”. Finally, participants dug into specific challenges to prioritize areas of greatest interest and clarify the problems to address.



Overview of general themes of challenges : There were six main “buckets” a majority of the ideas fell into: building human capacity, stakeholder engagement, data use, system policies and structures, instruction and assessment, and issues of DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion). We’ve summarized key challenges raised by participants in each below.

- **Building Human Capacity:** Participants consistently cited the need to align and build educator capacity to deliver and improve new models as a major priority and multifaceted challenge.

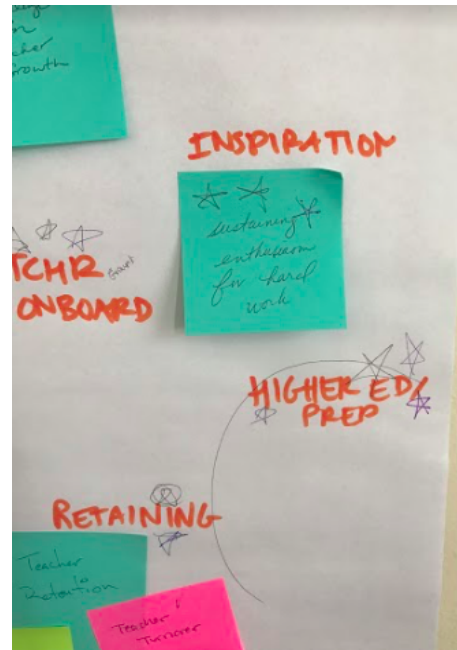
- **Teacher Retention** - Leaders reported that teacher turnover was a challenge, especially when shifting models (and related expectations). How might we better prepare teachers for change and prevent burn out?
- **Partnership with Higher Ed** - Local Institutions of Higher Ed’s lack alignment on and knowledge of innovative instructional approaches and competencies, so teachers currently need separate support to be ready for PL/BL models. Could better partnerships be forged?
- **Teacher Onboarding** - Leaders

reported that in order to ensure readiness and successful scaling of practices (for new and veteran teachers alike), teachers needed to be given concrete onboarding support and strategies on both the school and classroom level.

- **Personalized Professional Development**-Teachers need additional personalized support (since there is a large spectrum of experience) to ensure successful adoption and implementation of instruction in BL/PL models, which can take a lot of time and capacity on the school and system level.

- **Articulating Pathways to Readiness**-Leaders reported a desire to be able to more clearly “map out” and share what readiness for new models look like, which would be an essential step for articulating the potential means, mechanisms, and measures for how to achieve it.

- **Site/School Leadership onboarding** - Like teachers, school leaders need additional support to develop competencies in BL/PL models, so that they can own and understand the work happening at their site.
- **Building Mechanisms for Sharing Learning** - Leaders reported a need to build capacity to not only identify successful strategies but also capture and codify them to share internally and externally. While leaders want to do this continually, they report it is difficult, both in terms of priority and logistics.



- **Building and Maintaining Inspiration** - Leaders shared it was hard to maintain teacher inspiration through challenges, as many innovative implementations take time to roll out and see results. They'd like more strategies for doing so.
- **Stakeholders Engagement:** Effective engagement of key stakeholder groups is essential, but leader report wanting more tools for doing so, This was especially true for the following groups:
 - **School boards** - School boards need to understand the innovation being implemented at their schools, and engage in the shift to ensure appropriate supports are allocated appropriately according to needs.
 - **Students, Particularly During Major Transitions and Change** - Students need to feel that they are a part of the transition and understand the “why” behind instructional shifts to achieve true success on a classroom, school, and system level.
 - **Parents and Community Members** - Having students learn in a way that doesn't match adult school experiences can be confusing, so educating parents and other community members about the reasons for the changes and engaging them in the work is important, but is often unaddressed and poses a challenge.
 - **Unions** - Navigating contracts and union guidelines with iterative schedules, varied teacher roles, and classroom structures was noted as a challenge for systems and schools leaders.
- **Data Use:** The promise of data use to drive powerful instructional action feels both within reach and overwhelming.
 - **Data Privacy** - When working with multiple programs, young students online, etc., privacy remains an important issue. Leaders want better guidance and tools.
 - **Data Interoperability** - With various platforms, programs, and software being used at a single site, it is hard to ensure that all of the data produced “speaks” to each other in a meaningful and applicable way. Interoperability of tools and the data coming out of them remains an issue.
 - **Data Skills** - Even if privacy and interoperability is ensured, the production of data will mean little if it's not used to meaningful inform learning and drive instruction. Ensuring all teachers and students alike have the data skills to do so remains a challenge.
- **System Policies and Structures**
 - **Systemic Alignment** - When pushing new initiatives forward, leaders cite that decentralization on the system level makes small efforts daunting because of the lack of alignment. Central office and schools often see themselves as separate entities, which leads to distrust and challenges around how change management should take place on the teacher and leader level. Leaders need to build knowledge across the system about the



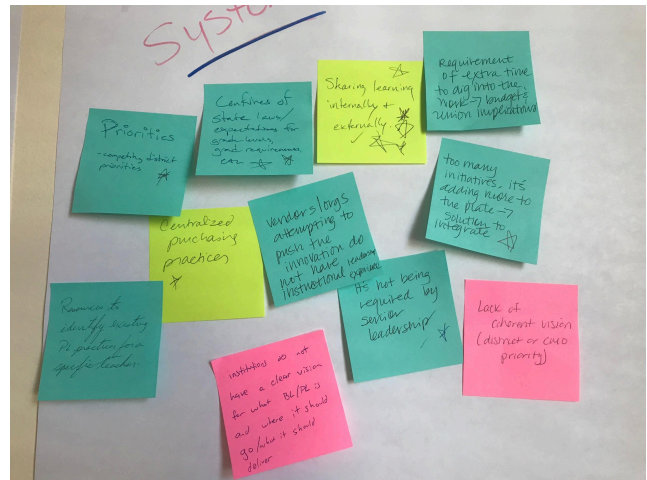
ultimate goals they are aiming for and processes being used so that critical interdependencies and support needs can be understood.

- **Managing Leadership**

Turnover - Management turnover (superintendents and other “C-level” employees) causes a loss of inertia and entails constant re-engagement of the senior level staff.

- **State policies, particularly around assessment**

- Leaders reported that many times state policies and evaluations don’t match current innovative approaches and in turn do more harm than help when measuring outcomes. Systems perceive 21st century skills and state testing as mutually exclusive, when in fact they should be working in partnership. They need deeper understanding of existing policies that enable or constrain action, as well as better connection to organizations shaping emerging ones.



- **Instruction and Assessment Approaches:** There were a few key practical issues that have emerged.

- **Instructional Support/Alignment** - Technology is often seen as an “aside” to the curriculum, rather than a necessary and infused component of the instructional materials and approach. Leaders need to shift mindsets to help educators and technology leads understand this.
- **Assessing the whole student (Metrics)** - Most grading systems inhibit new ways of learning and measuring learning. This results in a challenge around how to update grading systems to allow for common summative assessment and/or formative and performance based assessments which include the measurement of the whole student, including components focused on master-based learning, SEL (social and emotional learning) and others within BL/PL settings.
- **Using Open Educational Resources and Ensuring High Quality Curriculum** - Leaders wonder how education can effectively utilize open educational resources, while also ensuring that the resources themselves are quality, vetted materials. Leaders need for materials to be designed for implementation within nontraditional environments as well as better guidance on how to assess and maintain quality in implementation.

- **DEI-related challenges:** Issues of equity run as a through-line across all efforts, including the challenges listed above. However, leaders also pointed out some specific areas of growth they are working on
 - **Ensuring Equitable Access to Tools and Models** - While schools have made strides in increasing access to internet, devices, and software tools, there are concerns about how equitably different schools and students have access to them. More work needs to be done to define what digital equity looks like as well as to identify and share strategies for ensuring it.
 - **Digital Citizenship for All** - Leaders mentioned the high need for not only supporting but empowering students to be digital citizens ready for the world outside of the classroom. Digital citizenship resources need to be equitably implemented, not as enrichment but as core curriculum.
 - **Diversity of Staff** - As in general teaching and learning, teaching staff continue to not represent the demographics of the communities in which they teach. More work is needed to recruit and build on-ramps for a more diverse workforce.
 - **Cultural Relevance** - Culturally relevant pedagogy needs to be a focus of the innovation community. Leaders cite the need for technology, curricular providers, and professional development organizations to understand and build approaches that align to the communities they serve.
 - **Effectively Supporting all students (At-risk, ELL, SPED, credit recovery, students experiencing trauma)** - When implementing BL/PL, it is critically important to ensure the innovative approaches and models being piloted and developed truly support all students rather than contributing to larger divides and gaps. Leaders noted the need to share more information with each other about when certain approaches are not working, particularly for the students most in need of support.
 - **Ensuring Student Belonging** - How are we as educators ensuring that students, particularly in vulnerable populations, are feeling a sense of belonging and connection to their teachers and peers within our more flexible/ learner-centered learning environments?

In small groups, leaders then developed formal **problem statements around 1-2 of the subtopics above** that clarified the challenges and what success would look like if that challenge was addressed in an effective manner. During this time participants were also able to brainstorm how the various post-it challenges fit into the bigger buckets, as well as levers that could be used to address those challenges.

Problem statements: How might we...

Site/School Leadership onboarding:

How might we support the development of district and school leadership in innovative initiatives (e.g. BL/PL)?

Metrics:

How might we identify, use and leverage a broad range of metrics to measure and communicate student progress and achievement?

Teacher Onboarding:

How might we onboard teachers (both new and experienced) to PL/BL schools?

System Alignment:

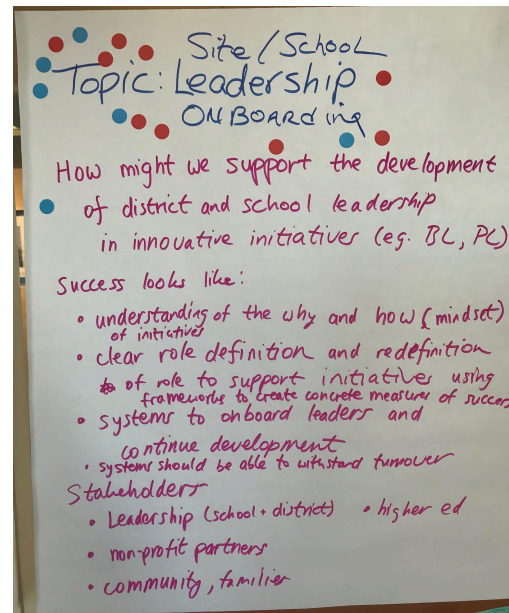
How might we align/calibrate priorities across the organization (districts, schools, networks, depts., grade level teams, external partners, consultants, etc.) to build PL capacity?

Managing Leadership Turnover:

How might we maintain investment in and understanding of PL in the midst of senior level leadership change?

Digital Equity:

How might we empower students to be digital citizens?



Finally the IDN was asked to **prioritize challenges by voting to help focus the conversation on the next day of the convening**. Each leader selected three challenges that they felt were the most pressing and vital problems to solve and three challenges that were solvable by the network itself. These rankings yielded 2 key challenges, metrics and teacher onboarding, that would be tackled the following day.

3. Collective Action Steps:

Based on participant feedback regarding the challenges they believe are the most pressing and solvable, the group began exploring potential action steps::

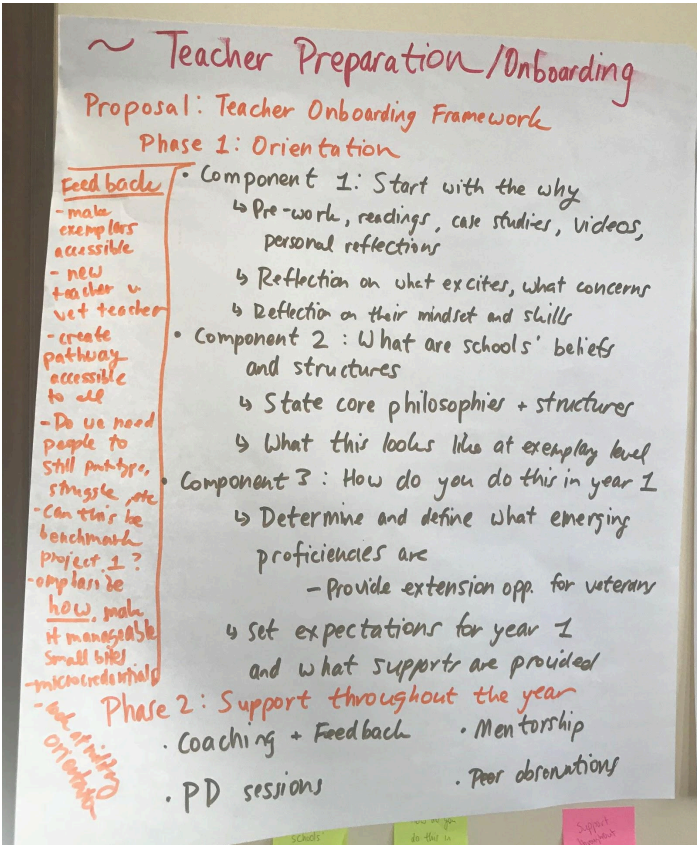
- What a possible solution or next step might look like;
- The potential role of TLA in helping solve the problem;
- The role of the IDN in helping solve the problem; and,
- Identification of any current resources that might be available to help solve the challenge.

Through this process, participants utilized their collective intelligence to start building out action steps to address these challenges in a concrete way. They were also able to present, reflect, and gain feedback from their colleagues to further push their thinking and fill gaps.

The two challenges focused on by the group were:

- 1) **Teacher onboarding:** How might we onboard teachers (both new and experienced) to schools pursuing innovations?
- 2) **Metrics:** How might we identify, use and leverage a broad range of metrics to measure and communicate student progress and achievement?

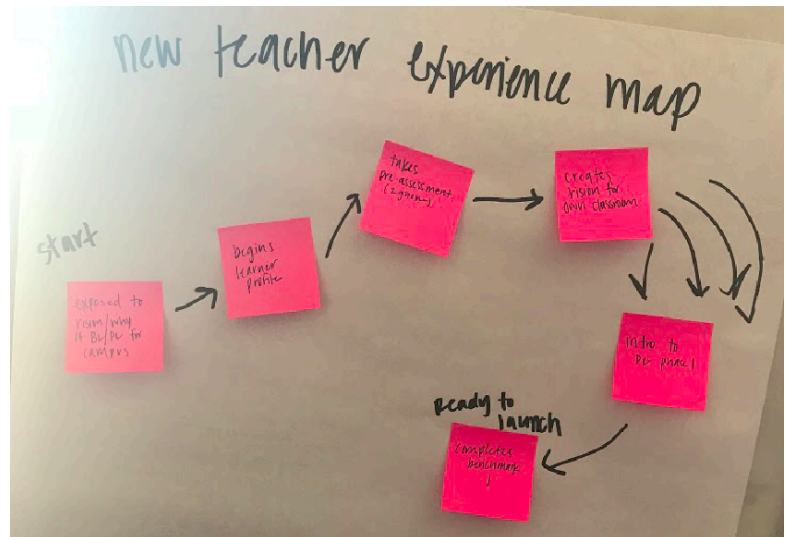
The results of the discussion are summarized on the following pages.



Teacher onboarding: How might we onboard teachers (both new and experienced) new to schools pursuing blended and personalized innovations?

Core Challenge: Innovative school networks have embarked on extensive design processes to develop their current instructional models. Though they continue to iterate and improve their respective models, momentum is lost when, each year, new staff (at all levels and with varied experience) join, requiring onboarding to the model. Networks need a streamlined, effective process for getting new staff aligned and invested in the model, allowing the model to continue evolving and improving, rather than reverting back to the initial phases.

Proposed Solution: Codify effective onboarding practices and build a universal, **adaptable framework** and **experience for onboarding teachers.** (e.g. “New teacher Experience Map” where teachers work through a pathway to gain proficiency and experience). By building a common framework and infrastructure for sharing support approaches and tools, networks within and outside of the IDN can benefit from streamlined systems and shared resources for building human capacity and expertise, as it relates to the implementation of their specific blended/personalized learning models.



Possible “teacher experience map” components could include:

- Common shared resources to introduce the “why” for implementation of innovative models
- Customized learner profile for educators
- Assessments to determine individual learning pathway against plan, including ongoing supports
- Shared resources to gain knowledge (based on the pre-assessment)

This shared “map” and related resources could be used by teams to develop and design an approach which systems could use to craft their onboarding processes, aligned to a specific school or network beliefs and/or design.

Roles and resources

Role of IDN <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Provide input to framework development and refinement● Contribute a pool of collective knowledge, practices, and resources● Utilize and continue to develop/share/give feedback on resources	Role of TLA <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Refine and create framework by identifying common characteristics of strong onboarding practices and aggregate resources● Find strong examples and aggregate available resources for each component of onboarding● Refine by helping determine metrics for effectiveness of onboarding (e.g. retention, students achievement, etc.)
Known Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Dallas ISD toolbox● Learning Commons resources● Distinctive Schools metric● LEAP learning framework● Relay GSE Blended Learning Courses● TLA Human Capital Practices● TNTP's Re-imagining Teaching in a Blended Classroom● BetterLessons Master Teacher Project	

What Success Would Look Like: If teachers are successfully onboarded and invested into the school or network's instructional model, teachers will be able to implement the model at an emerging level within the first quarter of the school year. In the long term, systems will be aligned to the model, where hiring pipelines align with the mindsets needed, and retention of teachers improves due to deepened investment.

Metrics: How might we identify, use and leverage a broad range of metrics to measure and communicate student progress and achievement?

Core Challenge: Metrics has become a loaded word in education, especially in personalized and blended learning classrooms where metrics tends to fall in a bit of a grey zone because of the intangibles that need to be accounted for. Without solid metrics and/or clearly measured outcomes, schools, districts, and CMOs alike are unable to demonstrate whether the innovative models they are adopting are impacting student growth, agency, etc. and continue to ask themselves "Is what we are doing actually working?" This is especially challenging when thinking about how to measure the non-cognitive skills which are vital to a successful blended and/or personalized learning classroom.



Solution: Clarify, capture, and share out successful approaches to metrics to amplify current work and provide actionable resources to those who are beginning to grapple with metrics in their own schools, districts, and CMOs. By clarifying the metrics themselves (especially around SEL, 21st century skills, habits of character, etc.) and building out a common language, the ecosystem will begin to use similar terminologies and can in turn start comparing apples to apples and improving outcomes for those key areas. In order to do this, the participants suggested they pool the existing approaches across the IDN itself, collect current metrics and identify a few shared focus areas. From there, participants would volunteer to share their expertise and best practices in those areas. These “tutorials” would give folks the opportunity to learn from each other and build resources and webinars that could support better implementation and understanding of metrics both internally and externally.

<p>Potential Role of IDN</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Contribute collective knowledge re: metrics (e.g. collect a list of metrics participants are currently using) ● Collectively influence the field through connections outside of the IDN ● Test various metrics across various districts/CMOs ● Identify focus areas and ways to share current approaches 	<p>Potential Role of TLA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Facilitate capture and codification of collective knowledge re: metrics (e.g. distill common approaches, supports, criteria, specific metric categories) ● Collect and share tools to produce data ● Connect participants to researcher partnerships ● Coordinate focused groups and capture learnings
<p>Known Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Measures for habits of success, such as SCALE and the mindset tools from PERTS ● DL2 ● The NGLC MyWays Framework ● TransformingEd’s MESH Framework ● Transcend Education’s Graduate Aims Database ● CASEL (Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning) ● P21 Framework for 21st Century Skills 	

Success: This is harder to gauge since there are a lot of components working together, but one group identified success as “a broad definition of student success being include in academic skills”, as well as stakeholder buy-in to metrics beyond standardized tests. Much like the challenge itself, to figure out if what we are doing is working, it is also hard to determine success of the solution itself because it too needs metrics to work from.



Next steps for action:

There was significant interest from the IDN participants to identify action steps and ways to move forward against our challenges. In order to continue that momentum, we have mapped out a few immediate action steps. As an ongoing network, we hope to support change in the short term, as well as the long term.

Next steps include:

- Formal share out of meeting materials and summary (included in this document);
- Follow up Zoom meeting to address possible action steps (both short and long term) around the 2 key challenges: Metrics & Teacher On-boarding. TLA will take the lead to assess options and then share back potential next steps.
- Follow-up winter IDN convening to continue action steps and further explore ecosystem challenges and ways the IDN can work to address them.
- Continued engagement and sharing via Slack, email, and formal/informal meetings to share best practice.

This document was created by The Learning Accelerator. All materials created are [CC BY](#). Please send any questions, comments, or feedback to juliana.finegan@learningaccelerator.org.

