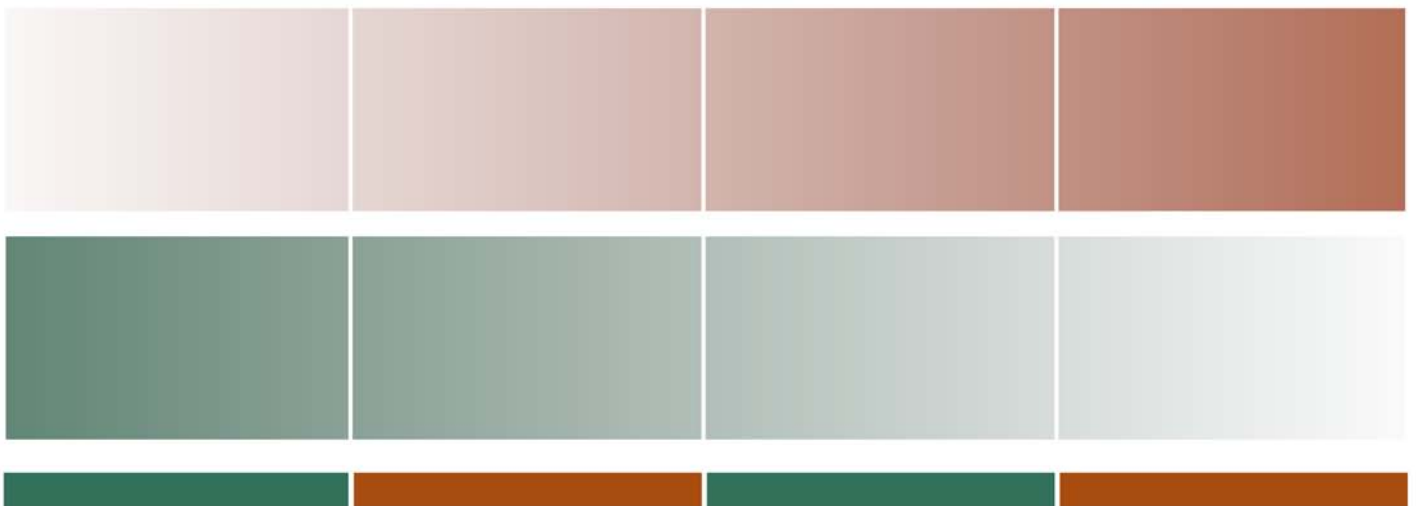


Communities of Practice to Achieve Results in Promise Neighborhoods

An Issue Brief



By Frank Farrow and Lisbeth B. Schorr

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This issue brief is part of the “Real Time Lessons Learned” Series: a collection of papers that draw on the experience of The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s place-based work, particularly the Making Connections initiative, to share information, strategies, evidence and ideas that can assist the federal government and private sector and philanthropic efforts to improve results for children, youth and families.

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USING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE TO HELP ACHIEVE RESULTS IN *PROMISE NEIGHBORHOODS*¹

Overview

The concept of “communities of practice” is increasingly recognized as a powerful approach to sharing knowledge and experience among practitioners who have similar interests and are committed to a common body of work. Alternatively described as “learning communities” or “peer learning,” the principle behind these approaches is the same: real-time sharing of practical knowledge, born of experience, can be both a motivating force and a key source of information for people grappling with the challenges of innovation. This approach has been used in foundation-funded and publicly-supported change efforts to accelerate progress. It gives implementers – the people leading local work – the forums to grapple with complex issues together and exchange information contemporaneously about “what works” as well as “what doesn’t.”

Creating communities of practice – or, put another way, forums for peer learning – among communities implementing *Promise Neighborhoods* can be an important technical assistance strategy and a powerful force to help achieve initiative results. To contribute to the U.S. Department of Education’s thinking about this approach, this paper:

- Notes core attributes of a community of practice, and shares observations and lessons from other initiatives that have used this approach
- Suggests activities that might contribute toward using this approach to accelerate progress toward results in *Promise Neighborhoods*.

Attributes of Communities of Practice and Experience with the Approach

The literature about communities of practice offers several definitions, but the straightforward one below captures the essence of why this approach can be useful in *Promise Neighborhoods*:

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.²

¹ This is one of several briefs prepared by the Center for the Study of Social Policy for the Office of Innovation and Improvement of the U.S., Department of Education, to assist the OII in its planning for the launch of *Promise Neighborhoods*.

Both the academic literature and recent experience from community change initiatives suggest what makes a community of practice or peer learning approach work. Effective efforts:

- Bring together participants with a shared field of interest, a commitment to a common purpose, and – in an increasing number of community change initiatives – a focus on a core set of results. For local *Promise Neighborhoods* leaders, the shared purpose would be participation in the federal initiative and their common focus on achieving the initiative's results.
- Engage participants in the design, so that participants “own” the process. A community of practice approach seems to thrive when participants have a strong voice in shaping its content, pace and format. The “community” should be genuinely that, and thus participants must have a strong degree of control in its creation and maintenance.
- Create regular opportunities to meet, exchange information, and build relationships. Participants in a community of practice need the time and opportunity to build relationships, so that the trust necessary for candid exchange is present. Initially, this usually requires in-person gatherings. As participants get to know one another, other forms of information exchange can be effective, including web-based forums, conference calls, “team sites” where participants post their latest experiences, questions, and so forth.
- Provide a good balance of reflection, applied learning and peer-to-peer exchange. Experience from other foundation-funded learning networks suggests that participants are most likely to benefit from opportunities to analyze what is working and what is not in terms of implementation; work together to adapt best practices to their own community contexts; and act as peer consultants to one another in order to create a different sense of what is possible. Carefully structured learning opportunities that provide this kind of balance enable more effective problem-solving, help communities avoid mistakes that others have made in the past, help participants build new skills, and create new knowledge that might not emerge from the work of a single community.
- Include opportunities for “role alike” exchange as well as information-sharing among more diverse groups of peers. Sometimes, shared learning is most effective when it is among people in the same roles: thus, school superintendents interact with other superintendents; community non-profit leaders interact with colleagues in similar jobs. For the purpose

² From “Communities of Practice: A Brief Introduction”, by Etienne Wenger, June, 2006, appearing on the website, www.ewenger.com/theory/communities_of_practice_intro.htm.

of learning about innovations, however, more diverse teams of peers (with *peer* more broadly defined) can also be effective, so that innovators have opportunities to exchange experiences and views from different perspectives. An example could be forums where resident leaders interact with school officials, or where human service officials exchange views with school staff. Convening teams of leaders from sites, with a deliberate mix of roles, can be illuminating in ways that a strict role-alike exchange may not be. Experience suggests that both types of exchange contribute valuable knowledge and accelerate learning in different ways.

- Recognize that communities of practice/learning communities can be important sources of motivation and support as well as knowledge building. When surveyed, participants in learning communities often cite the emotional support – the re-affirmation that others are experiencing the same challenges that inevitably accompany innovation – as a primary benefit of the regular contact with colleagues from other communities.
- Document the shared learning, so that it can be built upon over time and shared more broadly. Communities of practice are meant to have cumulative learning and impact. For this to occur, attention should be given to recording the knowledge shared; reflection on and analysis of that information; and continual dissemination of the information to the participants (and potentially to the field at large).
- Are “staffed” and supported by people experienced in this work. Peer learning groups benefit from having infrastructure to support their activity. Key support activities include: helping participants identify their priorities; creating and facilitating the forums in which people interact; capturing the knowledge exchanged by participants, so that it can be regularly disseminated; and ensuring that participants can regularly provide feedback to the effectiveness of the process. This is most often done by people or an organization charged with this task, who maintain the continuity of the learning community over time and who have experience in structuring activities that contribute to the group’s learning.

Implications for Promise Neighborhoods

Given the positive and productive experience with communities of practice/peer learning opportunities in prior initiatives, it would seem useful as part of the on-going technical assistance strategy for *Promise Neighborhoods* to design a learning community approach that would regularly connect leaders from the participating communities.

This strategy could:

- Convene a support network of key local staff and periodic meetings of local leaders during the design and implementation process.
- Involve teams of local participants, representing public and private sector leaders, the multiple systems whose efforts would need to be coordinated to achieve the results of *Promise Neighborhoods* and combine local residents and parents as part of these teams.
- Systematically address through peer learning the key issues having to do with core community capacities necessary to implement *Promise Neighborhoods*, as well as programmatic strategies that can help achieve the results. Core capacities would include developing and using a results framework and building a results culture; collecting and using data; mobilizing alliances of partners; assuring resident engagement and leadership; marshalling an adequate funding base by using multiple funding streams; and building public will. Specific issues of community capacity that could be addressed through peer learning forums, for example, include:
 - Mobilizing community partners around a results orientation
 - Establishing an effective governance process for the local initiative
 - Creating permanent resident and parent engagement and leadership strategies, so that social networks are supported, built and thrive
 - Financing strategies, so that federal funds will leverage as much state and local, public and private investment as possible
 - Using data to understand the current situation, project trends, understand “the story behind the data,” develop strategies and maintain accountability
- Given budget constraints, support the in-person meetings with web-based forums through which participating communities can regularly share materials, tools and experiences.