Power of a Network

[Image: Diagram showing interlinked gears labeled as POWER OF A NETWORK, STUDENT DRIVEN LEARNING, STUDENT AGENCY, SHARED LEADERSHIP, CULTURE OF INQUIRY]
How can networks support a school’s capacity to change and grow? Intentional networks became an important venue for fostering a supportive system of sharing knowledge, information, and expertise.
To change school culture we must question the traditional philosophy of “my kids, my classroom.” For far too long, educators have operated within the confines of their four classroom walls in what one site coordinator called “pure isolation.” In order to make the transformational shift towards student driven learning, the i3 New England Network made intentional design choices to harness the power of networking, and employed skilled facilitative leadership to support each site in accomplishing grant goals.

Through a collaborative process and multiple learning opportunities for teachers, students and school administrators, schools were able to move out of isolation and become a regional community of learners. Through this experience, they could explore new horizons in teaching and learning, including inquiry-based instruction that supports student agency and student designed learning experiences. The CSSR team created opportunities for site teams to develop strategies and support structures to examine their own professional development through reflection, refinement and skill building. Over time, site teams became the drivers of change where stakeholders felt comfortable taking risks and trying new strategies.

“arne’s Cartoon
CSSR School Change Coach

“I very rarely if ever in my 30 plus years in public schools thought anybody changed by their formal evaluation. Where I saw change, especially in this project, is when teachers learned from each other; when students challenged the way they were learning in the classroom. So the power of collaboration, the power of a network, is finding ways to constantly learn from each other.”

Peggy Reynolds
Site Coordinator - Nashua High School North and South

“It is really nice to see what other schools are doing and to learn from our school change coaches who always came in with an eye towards development and change. I highly encourage more schools to engage in the networking process because it is comforting to know I can pick up the phone and call a colleague in another state and say we are struggling with something how did you guys do it? That outside lens would help us when we felt like we were getting caught up not being able to see the forest through the trees. The conversation would just help us see things differently.”
CSSR created the Power of a Network through the following components:

- **The Performance Assessment Working Group (PAWG)** – a group of teacher leaders from each school met monthly to look collaboratively at student work across the i3 NETWORK. This involved sharing and improving lessons and assessments, scoring student work, and reviewing teacher-developed units against a clear external standard. Students became increasingly involved in this work over time—they not only attended PAWG meetings to lend their voice to instructional practices, but they also presented work created in collaboration with teachers.

- **The Performance Assessment Review Board (PAR Board)** – this group, led and facilitated by outside experts and practitioners from New England and beyond, made multiday school visits to each i3 New England Network school on 2 occasions over the duration of the project. They provided constructive and focused feedback to the schools, shining a light on both the bright spots and areas of challenge for each school. The PAR Board also included representatives from each of the 13 schools, which enlarged everyone’s appreciation of how school redesign looks in different contexts. A focus area of each visit was how performance assessments were taking root in each school, as a reflection of the depth of personalization in learning.

- **The Summer Institute** – this annual multi-day event brought together students, teachers, administrators, and community members from each of the 13 sites for an opportunity to network with one another; share new ideas; and learn and master new strategies. Each of the sites also had the opportunity to spend quality team-time together—to consolidate the learning and adapt the strategies and concepts to their unique learning environments. Over time, the Summer Institutes shifted from being expert-led to being fully student and teacher driven.

- **School Coaching** - a cadre of highly experienced school change coaches worked collaboratively in each school setting. They continuously monitored school needs and assessed how best to meet those needs, whether by offering just-in-time technical assistance or by reaching out to the larger school coaching team to tap the expertise of a particular colleague. By and large, the school change coaches served as facilitators to the schools, helping them deepen their work by asking probing questions and offering a perspective from the balcony, as it were. The coaches modeled the benefits of collaboration by regularly convening to share cross-site conversations to support each coach in better serving the specific schools to which they were assigned.
The networking components outlined, and described later in more detail, would not have been possible without two critical components: planning and facilitation. The embedded structures within each school building, and across the entire 13-school NETWORK, allowed for collaboration and risk taking to be the norm. With courage and a commitment to individual and team skill-building, powerful networks flourished and dramatically impacted the overall success of the i3 New England Network.

NETWORK PLANNING
The following design elements were essential to growing the powerful networks that emerged over the life of the project:

- **Purpose** - why the specific networking component was a key element
- **Membership** - who would be involved in this aspect of networking
- **Value** - benefit to the members
- **Inclusion** – how all stakeholders, including and especially students, could be meaningfully engaged in the work
- **Operating principles** - how the group would function and the goals on which it would focus
- **Coordination, facilitation and communication** within each network sub group – who would organize, communicate and facilitate the work
- **Continuous improvement** – use of reflection and evaluation to continually assess and adjust the work

For each of the networks, a planning team was engaged. This team was responsible for stewarding the work—evaluating progress and making adjustments and course corrections along the way. Over time, each of these networks gained traction, as relationships and skills broadened and deepened.

The networks also served as a checks and balances system that mitigated individual biases and created a sense of collective impact in which the whole became much greater than the sum of its parts. This formal collaboration, what CSSR calls a High Performing Team, served as the true engine for change. We know from experience that it takes courage to shift longstanding practices, particularly in institutions that have entrenched cultures; the support that derives from a well-functioning team encourages risk-taking. In helping to move school districts from a traditional teacher-centered culture, to a more student-driven inquiry-based culture, we found that the presence of a team enabled individuals, departments and entire schools to take a leap of faith into the unknown.
NETWORK FACILITATION
Skilled facilitative leadership is essential for expanding the power of a network by actively maximizing the talents and contributions of each member. Effective facilitative leadership involves using processes and tools—often called “protocols”—to tap the collective intelligence of the group to determine the right course of action and implement with fidelity. This includes: making it safe for others to offer their unique perspectives and talents, speak up when they have problems, take initiative, make appropriate decisions, work with others, and share responsibility for the accomplishments of the group. Skilled facilitative leaders build the capacity of both the individuals and the group in the following ways:

• Make connections and help others build meaning through purposeful conversation
• Balance the particular content of the conversation with a process that has integrity
• Regularly reflect on progress and purpose
• Provide direction to enable the group to articulate its own next steps
• Act transparently to invite productive feedback

Including intentional planning and facilitation into the design process are vital to allowing the time, structure and support needed for projects to flourish. In the following sections, we provide a detailed overview of the networking components of the i3 New England Network, in which planning and facilitation are in evidence.

PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT WORKING GROUP
The Performance Assessment Working Group (PAWG) was a group of teacher leaders from each school who met monthly to look collaboratively at student work across the i3 NETWORK. This involved sharing and improving lessons and assessments, scoring student work, and reviewing teacher-developed units against a clear external standard. Students became increasingly involved in this work over time—not only attended PAWG meetings to lend their voice to instructional practices, but also presenting work created in collaboration with teachers. (Kelli Thornhill, a senior at Nashua South High School, talks about her PAWG experience.)

PAWG was a highly successful network, created in direct response to the grant’s goal of strengthening authentic assessment practices throughout the i3 NETWORK. The purpose of PAWG was to gather a group of practitioners from each school to look collaboratively at student work, learn how to effectively assess the work of students and teachers and make recommendations on how to strengthen assignments to get better quality student work. PAWG evolved in response to the changing needs and growing capacities of the participating schools. At its last session on June 10, 2015 the members expressed a strong commitment to continue the work beyond the grant period; PAWG promises to be a key factor of post-grant sustainability.
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The PAWG consisted of a diverse group of representatives of the thirteen schools—namely, teachers, students, and administrators—who met monthly to review artifacts of performance assessment, and progress towards student-driven, inquiry-based learning strategies. The PAWG met at a different school each month, so that each school had an opportunity to open its doors to like-minded colleagues from outside of the school.

Before each PAWG meeting, CSSR coaches helped the PAWG representative of the host school prepare an agenda that pinpointed what student and teacher work would be examined and which protocols were best suited to provide the presenter with the most useful feedback. The most commonly used protocols in PAWG work were tuning, validation, and moderation/calibration protocols. The agenda also included an opening activity and a review of the norms of the group. The host school usually highlighted an ongoing dilemma or project, plan such as a Site council, a Senior Project or Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO). This provided deep learning for both the visitors and the host school and was a significant means of moving the i3 agenda forward across the Network.
The PAWG work began slowly and gained momentum rapidly. It took time for members to become familiar with the tools and processes for looking collaboratively at student work. Over time the group learned how to effectively present their work to the other group members, how to participate by giving targeted feedback and how to facilitate a productive conversation about important aspects of teaching and learning using structured conversations and formal protocols. As a result, PAWG members were instrumental in bringing CSSR’s Collaborative Practices Trainings to their own schools. A dynamic synergy developed between the PAWG and collaborative practices segments of the i3 program. As PAWG members deepened their skills they began leading the facilitation of monthly meetings. By encouraging colleagues at their schools to get trained, they supported the creation of school-based groups that engaged regularly in authentic assessment practices such as tuning student and adult work, validation, moderation and data analysis.

The outcome for PAWG members engaged in this work was twofold: members developed a deep understanding of performance assessments and how to use them on a regular basis to improve student learning; they also gained experience using structured protocols for collaboration. The development of facilitation skills on the part of all PAWG members was a key element of sustaining the work at their schools and encouraging meaningful professional collaboration among their colleagues. Over time, PAWG members took over from the CSSR coach the role of facilitation. Additionally, districts increasingly included students in their delegations.

In the fourth year of the grant, the PAWG developed a 5-point scale to measure how far i3 New England Network schools had come along the path toward professional collaboration and toward implementing performance assessments as part of a student-driven, inquiry-based culture.

- **Stage 1:** Majority of teachers work in isolation
- **Stage 2:** Some teachers/departments have built capacity to discuss, give feedback and look at student work collaboratively
- **Stage 3:** Most departments have capacity to look at student work; teachers routinely tune adult and student work; some students are involved
- **Stage 4:** Calibration and validation take place in most departments; increasing number of students are involved
- **Stage 5:** Calibration and validation are now the norm; students are routinely engaged.

All i3 New England Network schools moved purposefully along this continuum at their own pace. Each school embraced the concepts, but the implementation was personalized to meet the needs of their unique stakeholders. In the final months of the project, and after years of professional development, all schools had attained Stage 3 and many had moved beyond into Stages 4 and 5.
Two key elements were critical to the success and impact of the PAWG group:

- **Transparent Facilitation.** The CSSR coaches, and later the PAWG members themselves, were responsive to cues from the group—changing and adapting protocols to fit the circumstances and deepen the learning. In time all members became skillful facilitators capable of leading a protocol and planning suitable activities.

- **Involving Students.** As schools gained confidence they increasingly saw the power of having students at the table for these rich and meaningful conversations about practice. Increasingly students became involved in PAWG meetings, particularly when the PAWG visited their school. Some of the most significant learning from PAWG sessions involved those in which students led the way.

PAWG made a significant contribution to advancing the goals of the i3 New England Network and ensuring the sustainability of the work. The PAWG work gave teachers the confidence to feel good about what they were doing in the classroom and with their colleagues. Several sites are initiating local district-wide K-12 PAWG as a result of their involvement in the i3 New England Network, and key members of the group are planning to facilitate ongoing PAWG meetings between schools.

**PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT REVIEW BOARD**

Early in the development of the i3 New England Network, we recognized that the work would benefit by having a broad-based group of educators, policy makers and community members to advise on the practices, procedures and guidelines that would gauge progress in the thirteen high schools. The Performance Assessment Review Board (PAR Board) was modeled after the work done by the New York Performance Standards Consortium¹, and structured in a way that would deliver value to the unique i3 New England Network. Based on the suggestion of our original PAR Board Chair, Dr. Melissa Roderick from the University of Chicago, PAR Board visits included not only outside experts and stakeholders, but internal teachers, students and administrators from within the i3 NETWORK schools. This approach cultivated a robust network of learners, and allowed for collaborative implementation of the innovative i3 strategies.
The PAR Board consisted of twenty members representing higher education, practicing educators, policymakers and recipients of previous grants. The diverse backgrounds of the PAR Board membership promoted divergent thinking and resulted in nuanced, insightful feedback for the schools. The PAR Board modeled the collegial networking that was sought from the thirteen member schools using an inquiry model based upon CSSR best practices for Personalizing for Performance. This included a common set of measures, but an uncommon set of tasks to support progress toward project outcomes. Over the five-year grant period the PAR Board conducted two Site Visits at each i3 NETWORK school. Site Visits teams included three PAR Board members, CSSR school change coaches and representatives from each i3 New England Network school - including students. A set of Site Visit protocols were developed to bring structure to the visit for site visitors, school personnel, and students.

**The PAR BOARD Site Visit process included the following critical tasks:**
- PAR Board facilitation teams consisting of 2-3 experts planned and prepared the two-day visits with the host school leaders and CSSR coaches;
- The PAR Board visit leader finalized agenda, outcomes, and grant alignment activities with the host school;
- The two-day visit was open to outside school visitors;
- The PAR Board team conducted a debrief to identify key findings and suggestions to be outlined in the Site Visit Report;
- The final draft of the Site Visit Report was vetted with the visiting team and host school leadership;
- CSSR coaches would facilitate a consultancy with the host school to learn from feedback and refine practices.

PAR Board site visits reaffirmed the successes schools demonstrated in meeting grant objectives and offered guidance for next steps. Visits included introduction and orientation on the first day, student participation via representative teams from other i3 New England Network schools; students leading open discussions; and single students presenting their work on Extended Learning Opportunities (ELOs). Classroom visitations focused on new initiatives and meetings with classroom practitioners in the form of collaborative practices sessions focused on tuning work or problem solving current dilemmas.
At the conclusion of each Site Visit, the Site Visit leader facilitated a debrief session with PAR Board members and visitors from across the other Network schools. The debrief session was also open to other stakeholders (educators, students, community members) from the host school. The PAR Board gathered feedback from the Site Visit, including the interactive debrief session, to produce a Site Visit Report that included observations, findings and suggestions. In many of the schools, the CSSR coaches facilitated a text-based reading of the report with the full faculty in order to establish an action plan for the remaining years of the grant.

The second Site Visit became a way to gauge to what extent sites had been successful in meeting the issues raised during the first Site Visit. For example, one district used their District Site Committee to analyze the first report, which underscored the absence of genuine student voice and the domination of adult voices. With the guidance of their CSSR school change coach, they agreed to employ a variety of protocols that ensured a more democratic decision-making process that included students in a more intentional way.

By the fifth year of the grant, all thirteen schools were demonstrating progress as a direct result of PAR Board networking. The PAR Board members quickly learned that collegial dialogue enabled relationship building and emergence of trust between and among stakeholders. Visitations became increasingly influential once schools understood that site visitors were focused on offering validation, guidance and recommendations, rather than evaluation and critique about that which had not yet been accomplished. A highlight of the PAR Board work was the impact on students. Recommendations from Site Visits influenced broader policy and practices that directly affected the entire student population. As a result, students had the opportunity for genuine leadership experiences within the larger learning community.

For example, Kellie Thornhill, now a senior at Nashua High School South in New Hampshire, had the opportunity last year to engage in the PAR Board process through an Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO). “An ELO lets you explore your own personal interests and dictate your own educational experience; you are in charge of it. What struck me right off the bat at my first PAR visit was the lack of student presence. This is what gave me the idea to make an ELO about student voice and achievement. The opportunity to learn from others and see what goes into this type of change was incredible,” said Kellie.

1www.performanceassessment.org
The Summer Institute, a multi-day symposium providing targeted support and multiple learning opportunities, was the incubator for innovative strategy sharing and refinement of inquiry-based learning strategies within the i3 New England Network. Each year the Institute accommodated around 160 total participants including students, teachers and administrators. The Institute was a remarkable networking opportunity for building relationships and alliances across schools that were mutually beneficial to building capacity and sustaining the project goals and outcomes well beyond the five years of the grant. Like nearly all other aspects of the i3 New England Network, the Summer Institute grew in both substance and influence over time. As the content of each school’s work grew in import, the opportunity for networking followed the same trajectory.

CSSR used the Summer Institute as an opportunity to increase stakeholder proficiency and effort strategically over the five-year project. The Institute was structured to answer the following three guiding questions:

- What capabilities do I as a Network stakeholder need to be successful?
- What is my current level of proficiency to meet the goals and outcomes of the grant with fidelity, and change classroom culture?
- How do I continue to become more proficient over time and improve my practice?

As reflected in the examples below, each Summer Institute followed the stages of Knowledge, Skill & Talent Acquisition.

**Summer 2011**

**Stage 1: Find value in work based on understanding**

The first Summer Institute was led and directed by CSSR coaches to explore the vision and possibilities for the i3 work. Reviewing the grant initiatives and outcomes was only of value once participants better understood where we were going, and why. Participants were prepared to engage in conversation based on their learning from Newmann and Senge. Time and coaching support (conditions for success) were provided for school teams to meet and chart their work for the coming school year. The action plans created during these team-planning opportunities became the foundations of planning for year 2 of implementation.
Stage 2 and 3: Recognize areas for personal and professional growth

The second Summer Institute began the shift away from the “what” of inquiry-based learning (what is inquiry-based learning, what does inquiry-based learning look like in my classroom) to the “how” of inquiry based learning (how do I change my mental models to engage in Student Driven Learning experiences in the classroom?). Participants completed a self-assessment and evaluated their actions and behaviors in order to recognize areas of personal and professional development that they and their colleagues must go through to embrace an inquiry-based approach. Based on the coaching done in the first year of the project, the Institute provided targeted professional development opportunities using a seminar model where participants self-selected interest strands such as: Collaborative Skills and Practices; Courageous Conversations in School Leadership; and Inquiry and Assessment Strategies (by content area). Sites were required to bring students to the Summer Institute, who followed a strand on Student Agency. The conversations among adults and students highlighted the need for a larger Network-wide conversation around looking at student work and exploring inquiry-based pedagogy. These conversations, contentious at times, led to the creation of the Performance Assessment Working Group, and were an important step away from group “storming” into group “performing.”

2Newmann and Senge

Stage four: Using calibration and moderation to deepen learning experiences.

The third Summer Institute focused on developing and refining inquiry-based learning units and authentic assessment practices. Participants could be more engaged in deeper learning activities that built upon their experience in the first and second years. For the first time, participants completed a moderation of student work within content areas teams, which asked them to present artifacts of student work that were assessed by the group using a common rubric. Many participants were fearful and confused during the moderation study—reflective of the isolation that many practitioners experience in their professional practice. The results of this activity set the stage for a year-long PAWG focus on structured conversations and activities around: looking at student work, calibration, validation and moderation. The results of the initial moderation study in the third year set the stage for one of the greatest successes in the project, the moderation study in the fourth year.
Summer 2014

Stage 5: Refinement of the calibration and moderation processes
The CSSR team planned for three major outcomes during the fourth Summer Institute: 1) conduct a calibration and validation study that included students at the table providing feedback; 2) expand the work of content area teams to develop curriculum plans, assessment tools and rubrics - utilizing authentic work artifacts brought from their classrooms; and 3) focus on leadership and sustainability for the final phase of the grant. Schools were now ready to take the lead and work sessions were increasingly facilitated by participants with coaches’ support. Resulting from the initial poorly received moderation study in 2013, and following a yearlong focus on collaborative skills training, the fourth Summer Institute included calibration and validation activities on the final day that exceeded expectations. Facilitated by well-trained PAWG members, and including more than 30 students from across the Network, participants looked collaboratively at student and teacher tasks – a process that had become routine to a majority of the participants. Students who attended the Institute lent their rich voices and insights to the validation of lessons and units, and teachers were ready to embrace the feedback and adjust their practice based on what they heard.

Summer 2015

Stage 6. Celebrating success and planning for continuous improvement
The fifth and final Network Summer Institute was an opportunity for schools to demonstrate proficiency as high-performing teams. Sites were given full autonomy to share and facilitate all workshops and conversations. Conversations were structured around the following five areas: Culture of Inquiry, Student Agency, Student-Driven Learning, the Power of Networks, and Shared Leadership and Sustainability. The second day of the Institute featured a school showcase where each Network school presented two 75-minute workshops highlighting one or two of their best practices – an opportunity to share with other practitioners the areas of school redesign of which they were most proud. The Institute was focused on sustaining the work, and the majority of sites indicated that they were preserving many project roles after the end of grant.

The deep networking opportunities that took place over the five years were the result of measured planning and, contextually based adjustments. Each year, expectations were raised for attendees: to work together on performance assessments; to increase their use of collaborative practices; and to include students in increasingly meaningful ways in the redesign process. Each of the five Summer Institutes began and ended with a student focus, and student involvement and influence grew as the grant work developed. Over 40 students attended the 2015 Summer Institute and in many cases they acted as lead presenters for their school’s work.
use a plethora of tools and strategies to organically build knowledge from within. (Link here to CSSR role document) Responsive coaching is a balancing act and includes a comprehensive approach to addressing instruction, leadership and culture change. To be successful, it requires a coach who works hand-in-hand with the school stakeholders, helping them to envision what is possible, and building professional capacity by influencing both the heart and the head. With a coach’s guidance, the building stakeholders become the expert over time. CSSR school change coaches played a critical role in the establishment and sustainability of the high-functioning networks created through the i3 project.

An effective coach accepts ambiguity and works with the school based on where they are now and can possibly go in the future. CSSR coaches take a philosophical stance to culture change that says “go slow, to go fast.” Coaching in the i3 New England Network varied considerably according to each school’s culture and the depth of its commitment to fundamental change. The coaches provided support for, and modeling of, the shift away from traditional teacher-centered instruction and test-based assessment, to instruction centered on student work and assessment based on the meaningful application of essential knowledge and skills. To be successful this shift requires personalizing the school environment by empowering students to collaborate in making school policy, and partnering with faculty and administration in fundamental choices related to how and what they learn.

Dr. Gregg Sinner,
CSSR School Change Coach

“I discovered after 40 years in the work that we could assemble a network of regular schools in order to begin to address some of the issues that they faced, with some of the potential that we could bring in terms of facilitation and co-creation. We partnered with people to talk about what their issues are and helped them find their own solutions with the skills and knowledge and understanding that we had. At the end of the [2014] Summer Institute I thought ‘where I am right now in this group and this time, is what I’ve been dreaming of doing my entire professional life’ because I didn’t think it was possible. Now I know it’s possible”
CONCLUSION
The networking dimension of the i3 New England Network was transformational for the individuals and schools involved. Sites modeled collaborative learning, deepened relationships, fostered the cross-pollination of ideas, and confronted seemingly intractable barriers to systemic and sustainable change, which unleashed multiplier effects within and across the thirteen participating schools. Participants used the networking opportunities to engage in deep conversations based on pedagogy, student needs and the role we all play in changing school culture. Strong facilitation allowed all voices to be heard and for participants to better understand how the project, the coaching, and the best practices were changing the fabric of what school is and could be. Whereas the data suggests that the schools are demonstrating improvement in student engagement and increasing student performance as a result of the work, we believe the real success comes from the conversations and the experiences influencing all project stakeholders to think long and hard about their own practice and the state of learning and teaching within and beyond their school building.

GLOSSARY TERMS
Authentic Instruction and Assessment – Learning that includes construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry and value beyond school
Calibration – An activity to reach consensus scoring within a school community
ELO – Extended Learning Opportunity, a credit-bearing experience in which students create projects aligned with their interests, skills and passions that can be carried our any time, anyplace, and at any pace. Student must demonstrate mastery.
Moderation – A cross-district activity to reach consensus on scoring authentic work, including conversations around improving assignments.
Tuning – A protocol to improve practice.
Validation – A process to assess whether an assignment is of sufficient quality for optimal learning