SHAPING EDUCATOR LEARNING COMMUNITIES

A quick GUIDE
**CONTENTS**

**01 WHY LEARNING COMMUNITIES?**
Goals & Dreams

**02 GETTING STARTED**
Getting Started
Gathering the Team
Plotting the Calendar
Building the Frame
Setting the Agenda

**03 BARRIERS & ANTIDOTES**
Time
Value
Community & Connection: Process & Focus
Tools, Resources, Materials

**04 INPUT QUESTIONNAIRE**

---

**WHO IS THIS FOR?**
This quick guide is produced for anyone invested in supporting teacher learning and development. Whether you’re an administrator or non-profit partner, the intention of this guide is to focus your attention as a prospective learning community leader on concrete needs of in-school educators.

---

This quick guide (2021) is a collaboration between Maker Ed, a national non-profit whose mission is to transform teaching and learning through the power of making, and Kristin Moon, STEAM Program Administrator at Portland Public Schools. This guide and the learning it represents were generously funded by The Lemelson Foundation, whom we thank for their support and unwavering commitment to invention education.
We dream of teaching and learning that is **hands-on**, **liberatory**, and **learner-driven**. We believe teachers can support each other to shift and grow their practice to these ends. And we know that it takes time, commitment, trust, and community to sustain these shifts.

For these reasons, we believe that ongoing and intentional learning communities can best facilitate teachers to shift and grow their practice. Inspired by approaches to teacher learning and development from the **communities of practice** and **professional learning communities** traditions and by the aspirations and experiences of K-8 educators on the ground, we imagine rich dynamic learning communities for educators where the following truths flourish:

- **Educator focus** remains centrally on shifting practice to be more liberatory, hands-on, and learner-driven, balancing and blending attention to both theoretical questions and practical applications.

- Throughout, educators **connect**, **share**, and **build trust** with each other - as a whole group, in smaller groups, and one-on-one.

- Educators share pictures and **problems of practice**, give and receive **feedback**, **iterate** and **improve** on their own practice by reflecting on evidence, and create and exchange resources.

- Educators feel called to **share** their learnings, tools, and resources with the wider community, extending value beyond the immediate context of their classrooms.

- **Leadership** takes many forms, is both shared and distributed, and is valued.
In approaching the design of learning communities, we spoke to and learned from K-8 educators representing an array of subject areas and serving traditionally marginalized learners (including BIPOC learners and low-income learners). Drawing on their rich repertoire of experience as educators and learners, they helped us identify opportunities as well as real constraints and challenges to building and sustaining conditions for ongoing learning for educators.

Based on these insights, we offer a flexible outline for designing educator learning communities, including both guidance related to community topic & focus, structure & shape, engagement & connection, and leadership and recommended antidotes to common barriers to educator participation.

---

**GATHERING THE TEAM**

- Whether home-grown from inside a school/district or the effort of a cross-sector collaboration, learning community planning must involve at least one individual familiar with teacher contracts, administration, and operations within the school/district.

- Learning community leadership must be inclusive and diverse, with respect to both role and identity. Administrator perspectives must be balanced by teacher voice and input. And it’s crucial that BIPOC educators play leadership roles where a majority of BIPOC students are being served.
PLOTTING THE CALENDAR

- *How long does an educator learning community last?* We know that real change takes time. Learning community *duration* depends on overarching goals. We recommend at least 1 year's duration if the goal is to achieve a shift in teacher identity. We recommend at least 2 year's duration if the goal is to accomplish measurable shifts in student identity. And we commend a sustained 3 to 5 year duration, if the goal is to see measurable shifts in student outcomes.

- *When does an educator learning community begin?* Because we know that the middle of the academic year and middle of academic terms are taxing times for teachers, we recommend coordinating learning community kick-off times with summer or pre-term planning periods.

- While learning communities may evolve in form over time as educator needs arise, we nevertheless recommend installing at least a 6-month long planning onramp before the start of the community, in order to clarify goals, outline agenda arcs, align calendars, and build educator commitment.

- Remain conscious of and responsive to local community calendars beyond academic schedules to make sure religious and/or community holidays and commitments are honored.

BUILDING THE FRAME

- Educator learning communities may be structured in a variety of ways, but should include the following two basic elements.
SETTING THE AGENDA

- Iterative cycles of practice and reflection will form the core of engagement in educator learning communities. Whatever the focus of shared or individual attention (whether on curricular design or student work), educators collaborate on trying things out in their classroom, reflect on evidence of practice, and make shared meaning out of that evidence with the aim of improving practice. The ultimate aim of inquiry-based practice is to center the voices of educators and their learners.

Below are some examples and models of engagement that support practice- and process-oriented iteration and reflection.

Lead by Learning, a program of Mills College of Education, and Agency by Design Oakland's Teacher Fellowship anchor teacher development in inquiry cycles, driven by teacher-posed essential questions.

Teacher Action Research, like inquiry, involves educators in first-hand and collaborative investigation of their own practices.

Lesson Study encourages educators to look closely at their own designs alongside student learning in order to reflect on and improve their practice.
NEEDS

One of the greatest barriers to educator participation in learning communities is **time**. With stacked instructional schedules and little planning time, classroom teachers are often unable to commit to adding another meeting into the fray of their calendars.

In order for learning communities to be accessible for teachers, teachers need dedicated time to attend meetings and to work on their instruction both inside and outside of the classroom.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- If learning community activities take place inside of the school day, negotiate how teacher prep periods, all staff meetings, and/or release days will be dedicated to this effort.

- Buy out a percentage of teacher time (~50%) for anyone playing a leadership role in the learning community.

- If funding (through the district and/or a community partnership) allows, buy out a percentage of teacher time (~50%) for all participating educators.

- Fund and/or arrange for substitute teachers for participating educators.

- Publish clear and transparent meeting agendas to signal how time will be spent.

- Coordinate alignment between learning community work and the academic calendar, noting particularly "busy" periods (such as testing, end-of-year, etc.)
NEEDS

It is imperative that educator skill, expertise, and knowledge be valued and recognized.

These assets come from a commitment to practice and to learning, which forms part of the work of education. As such, teachers need to have their time, participation, and labor honored. An educator learning community cannot be just another extra commitment on top of and outside of already stacked plates.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Pay participating educators for their time and work by providing stipends. See sample stipend breakdown below.
- Offer means by which the ongoing learning and work of educators can be made visible and shared, such as through continuing education units (CEUs) or micro-credentials.
- In addition to the means described above, use storytelling to cultivate administrator buy-in and foster a wider culture of excitement and recognition around learning community work.

STIPEND BREAKDOWN

- We recommend that educator time be valued at at least $50 per hour.
- If a 10-month long learning community involves a 4 hour monthly time commitment (including meeting attendance, coaching check-ins, and planning & practice time), then a $2,000 stipend should be offered.
- Because some participants will share in community leadership responsibilities (related to coordination, scheduling, planning, etc.), we recommend that an increased stipend rate apply to them.
PROCESS NEEDS

Educators are each other's greatest resource. In order to learn and grow, educators need opportunities to connect and collaborate with each other as they hone their practice.

In order to shift their practice to be more equitable, liberatory, and anti-racist, which involves deep work of personal and collective discovery, they also require safe spaces to be vulnerable. Special care must be devoted to how these spaces are held.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Cultivate safe, brave, and vulnerable spaces for taking risks, making mistakes, sharing experience, and honoring others.

- Begin by setting norms of engagement, set intentions around these, and refer to them continuously.

- Foster a culture of celebration and critique by embedding ongoing opportunities for educators to give and receive feedback.

- Offer opportunities to collaboratively make meaning together (whether through observing instructional practice or looking closely at student work).

- Allow educators to step into their learners' shoes, experiencing hands-on, liberatory, and learner-driven lessons and activities as learners.

- Consider introducing identity-based affinity groups or caucuses to dedicate space for safe processing, unpacking, and addressing of harm.

- Because individual educators will have unique communications styles and preferences, incorporate multiple tools and platforms to support communication and connection.
FOCUS NEEDS

Hands-on, learner-driven practice can only be a tool for liberation and justice in education when coupled with individual and collective work focused on unlearning bias and disrupting harm.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Engage existing conversations in educational equity. Culturally-responsive teaching, social justice education, and abolitionist teaching are examples of traditions and approaches that address teacher practice in pursuit of equity.

- Zaretta Hammond’s Ready for Rigor Framework and Gholdy Muhammed’s cultivating genius framework offer powerful learner-centered anchors for reflecting on teacher practice.

- Use Tema Okun’s White Supremacy Culture to aid in individual and collective unlearning of dispositions that uphold white supremacy.

- In reflecting on teacher practice, imagine ways to expand the horizon of how learning is assessed. How can students help make their own learning visible through their hands-on learning?
NEEDS

Just like with time and money, access (or lack thereof) to necessary resources and materials forms a barrier to learning community participation.

Educators have material needs, ranging from food to childcare to basic classroom supplies, that need to be met.

RECOMMENDATIONS

• Whether convening in-person or virtually, make allowances or arrangements for food during synchronous meetings.

• If meetings are held outside of typical work-day hours, arrange for child care.

• Distribute kits with low-tech prototyping (i.e. "craft") materials.

• Curate examples of existing curricula as models, inspiration, and reference points.
Educator Input Questionnaire

Ensure that teacher voice is centered as you design your learning community. Use and adapt the questions below to gather input.

☐ What would most support you to shift your practice to be more equitable and learner-driven?

☐ What do you need in order to feel safe and courageous when reflecting on and unlearning your own bias and stretching your practice in new directions, both individually and with others?

☐ Consider your most meaningful relationships with other educators. What characterizes these connections and supports them to grow?

☐ How do you like to communicate and connect with other educators outside of synchronous meetings and work times? Are there spaces, places, or platforms (such as email, listservs, social media, online forums) you prefer and why?

☐ What time- and timing-related needs would need to be met in order to participate in a learning community?

☐ What resources (material and fiscal) would you need in order to participate in a learning community?