

Professional Network Study

K-12 Practitioner Panel Focus Group Insights

March 2023

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Professional Network Study

OVERVIEW

STUDY PURPOSE & CONTEXT



Where do practitioners turn to improve their practice, get energy, make new connections, etc.?

The Gates Foundation is exploring how a network-based strategy may be an effective avenue for reaching and supporting math practitioners and principals who work with the foundation's priority student populations.

As networks for supporting practitioners become more of a priority in the Gates Foundation's, new strategy the foundation is gathering information on what is known about networks and is exploring hypotheses on how networks can be used to better support practitioners (see [Network Study Plan here](#)).

In support of this larger strategy, Gates Foundation's Enabling Conditions Team worked with ResultsLab between January and March of 2023 to explore the use of formal and informal out-of-school/ out-of-district networks used by principals and math teachers.

APPLICATION

Study findings will be useful in establishing and clarifying the foundation's strategy for how best to reach practitioners to support the foundation's ultimate strategy of improving learning outcomes for math students.

OUT-OF-SCHOOL/DISTRICT OR OPT-IN NETWORKS

May include professional associations, communities of practice, alumni networks, online forums, and more are used by practitioners in contrast to in-school/district networks.

STUDY APPROACH



Who was involved and what methodologies were used?

In a two-month, rapid study, ResultsLab used methods in community-based participatory research to explore how practitioners in Gates in priority states (CA, TX, NY, FL) engage with out-of-school/district networks.

ResultsLab began by exploring the topic of networks through its online community, the K-12 Practitioner Panels, where members shared information about what networks they use and why. These early findings helped shape the approach of our focus group discussion guides. ResultsLab facilitated a series of focus groups with math teachers, math instructional coaches, and principals.

Additionally, to address scheduling challenges, the team also offered an alternative way to engage, an online journal, where participants could contribute their insights at a time that worked best for them.

**Please see [Appendix](#) for additional methodology details including sub-learning questions, data collection tools, and study participant details.*

LEARNING QUESTIONS*

- 1) To what extent are formal and informal out-of-school/district networks being used by math teachers and principals?
- 2) In what capacity do people see these networks as contributing to changes in mindset and practices?

INSIGHT HIGHLIGHTS



Preferred network formats: Social media feeds, state or regional professional specialty organizations, and demographic affinity groups.



Greatest perceived value of networks: Space for peer connection and resource for information about current events and best practices.



Greatest limitations on network accessibility and equity: Cost and time.



Greatest opportunities: Transforming educator collaboration and passion into action. Creating a plan of tailored support for principal and teacher/coach community needs + interests.



Professional Network Study

INSIGHTS



NETWORK USE

"In social media spaces, I tend to be more of a lurker just gathering information.

When it's a smaller space and just a few people with common interest, I tend to be more of an active participant."

-High School Math Teacher, California

WHAT KINDS OF NETWORKS DO K-12 PRACTITIONERS USE AND HOW DO THEY ENGAGE WITH THEM?

- Practitioners engage with social media networks, statewide education networks, and affinity networks.
- Network engagement can take the form of following social media content, engaging in online dialogue, attending webinars and conferences, reviewing resources shared, and offering support to other members.

NETWORK USE | Social Media Networks

TYPICAL MEMBER BASE:	Varies significantly due to wide variety of networks varying from local to global in scale and from general content to subject or place-specific
PURPOSE:	Ranges from disseminating general information about current events to highlighting experts or providing support and encouragement
STRENGTHS:	Real-time problem-solving, access to new and innovative ideas, access to high-profile education influencers, easy access to supports and encouragement
CHALLENGES:	Deep, 1:1, or sustained engagements with time are lacking and engagement may be limited by platform interface


"I've met people on LinkedIn that helped me grow as a leader and as well as a person."

- Middle School Principal, Texas

"I like to use Facebook groups. Teacher-to-Teacher is one. Another one is just a third-grade math forum where we discuss all forms of education, different lessons that we use, different resources that we can access. And it's just something I can go on when I have time and can share some ideas and take some ideas from others."

- Elementary School Teacher, New York



Teacher2Teacher 
@tchr2tchr - Community

NETWORK USE | Statewide Math/Education Networks

TYPICAL MEMBER BASE:	Specialized by practitioners of a specific geographic area or role
PURPOSE:	Provide information on current events and peer community tailored to constraints of a geographic area (ex: state standards) or role; Community is grounded in what members do
STRENGTHS	Networks seen as safe spaces for problem-solving and help without judgement in an environment that is encouraging and improvement-focused
CHALLENGES:	Cost may be prohibitive of participation; Engagement requires travel or commitments during the workday

“We had the opportunity to meet in person and cohorts... And then we had a connection to one leader that supported us and then someone that we could reach out to after.

So, if I had a question that wasn't necessarily something that made sense for a public forum. That's what made it my favorite network.”

- Middle School Math Instructor, New York



NETWORK USE | Affinity Networks

TYPICAL MEMBER BASE:	Sub-group practitioner populations who share a common identity or shared experience and can extend across practitioner roles
PURPOSE:	Provide access to resources and supports in a fraternal setting that has extending trust and comradery from a larger parent group
STRENGTHS:	Safety and sense of community for practitioners who work in isolation; ongoing collaboration and relationships rather than one-off engagements, mentoring and coaching opportunities
CHALLENGES:	Can be insular in nature with potential for an echo-chamber feel; Access is identity based and thus not always accessible or open

“It's always nice to be able to connect with women who...value excellence in education , who promote women in education and children learning and having an excellent education.”

-Instructional Coach (K-12),
Florida



NETWORK USE | Engagement Formats



Practitioners turn to formal and informal networking spaces for different types of information and professional support.

- Many practitioners look to social media feeds so they can (1) follow current trends in education and (2) engage in casual conversations about education with high-profile practitioners and peers outside of their local district. Others subscribe to recurring newsletters or readings to keep updated on the latest practices and trends.
- Practitioners also look to educational networking websites or organizations for recorded or virtual interactive content, such as webinars or hosted discussion forums, where they can “make and take” critical content back to their schools.
- Additionally, some practitioners opt to attend in-person live conference events to support their professional development and engage in active discussion around problems of practice.

“One of the powerful things with the networks has been being able to communicate with rock star teachers. Twitter has been a really big source of [support]. Some of these people, you have to pay hundreds of dollars to go see them present at these conferences and things like that and they just post up on Twitter for free.

You can reply and sometimes they actually respond to you. It is really cool to be able to connect with people who have so much more experience than I do and have such a variety of experience from what I do.”

– High School Math Teacher, California



NETWORK VALUE

“Networking makes me look outside of where I am, at what other people are doing, and how they're doing it. It also makes me think about the bigger picture of education: Where it was, where it is now, and where it's going to go into the future.”

-Math Instructional Coach (K-12), Florida

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF NETWORK ENGAGEMENT?

- Networks are a source of connection, motivation, and inspiration in that networks can connect people with similar challenges to find common solutions while staying inspired to direct change in the K-12 space.
- Practitioners appreciate having access to a variety of networks and structures to meet various need and appreciate that networks are a safe space to ask questions free of judgment and reprimand.

NETWORK VALUE | Connection and Support



Practitioners across the focus groups expressed that they heavily rely on networks as spaces for building professional connections and sustaining motivation and inspiration in their work.

- Some practitioners look to their networks as a go-to resource for best practices and current research that may or may not be otherwise discussed within their own local districts.
- Others steer towards networks for peer support or coaching that can help offset feelings of isolation or discouragement within their own schools, especially for minoritized practitioners and those who are new to their role.

“Whether it is your students aren't grasping the material, or whether you just feel like you're just overwhelmed with it, whatever your isolated situation may be ... when you come across a post and you see somebody mention a situation similar to yours, you're like, 'Oh my God , I'm not alone. I'm experiencing the same thing.'”

It's one of those moments where you're just like, 'I could just hug my phone.' You feel reassured knowing that you're not crazy and not wandering in this big educational system by yourself. You're able to just pour yourself into them and they're able to keep you going.”

– High School Math Teacher, Texas

NETWORK VALUE | Accessibility



Practitioners value the flexibility of networks as a resource and community that they can engage with on their own time and level of commitment making them supportive in the face of changing needs and demands.

- Practitioners see external networks as spaces for learning and broadening their understanding beyond “the way we’ve always done it” approaches they may encounter within district-level codified supports (in-house PD and curriculum materials).
- Classroom practitioners are especially drawn to network spaces where information is timely and easy to browse.
- At administrative levels, networks provide a space for new school leaders to engage in conversations and peer support to address gaps in training and onboarding resources from their local districts as they take on new or unfamiliar leadership roles.

"I have much more success with a more informal group just because I can come and go as I please and I can take what I want from them. There are no requirements. I am always open to finding new and interesting groups to join, but it's the informality for me really works because you can go in and ask questions, find out things that other people are doing, other programs that other people using. I find people are much more honest when it's sort of a closed group, but not necessarily one that you have to join an organization."

- Elementary School Teacher,
Florida

NETWORK VALUE | Safe Spaces



When asked to contrast the value of network engagement compared to other professional and personal support resources for educators, classroom instructors highlighted the value of networking events or channels that provide safe spaces for discrete conversations among peers about challenging issues in their schools or classrooms without fear of judgment or reprimand.

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“If I’m having an issue in my classroom, I may not want to share that with a teacher at my site, for fear that does get back to admin. I can feel safe to do so [in a network] because these people don’t know me personally.

So I can sometimes be more vulnerable and feel safer in those spaces for the things that I’m struggling with without fear of there being any sort of retaliation.”

-High School Math Instructor,
California



NETWORK LIMITATIONS & CHALLENGES

"I bring up costs because my district is not going to pay for anybody to go to these things. I really think there's more meaning when you're interacting with the people . [Not] just reading their articles. You really need to talk back and forth. ... but it's expensive."

Math Instructional Coach (K-12), Florida

WHAT DO PARTICIPANTS VIEW AS THE GREATEST LIMITATIONS OF NETWORKS OR BARRIERS TO NETWORK ACCESS?

- Practitioners state that time and cost are two barriers that hinder engagement and express that they are less likely to participate in networks that fail to provide up-to-date, organized, relevant resources.
- Practitioners experience frustration in networks that focus on problems instead of solutions and appreciate networks with resources that are ready for application.

LIMITATIONS & CHALLENGES | Access & Equity



Educator work schedules are a significant barrier to engagement due to the emerging demands on principals and the need for substitute teachers to fill in, thus placing further demands on school staffing.

- Practitioners cite cost as the most significant barrier to accessing and engaging in networks. Many educators are interested in joining no- or low-cost external networks, noting that school districts often do not cover expenses for external network membership or participation.
- Principals cited also that many teachers have families and young children, thus making it challenging to attend at out-of-district live networking events, like conferences, that require travel, childcare, and time away from home or work.
- These types of access issues were cited as perpetuating inequities in professional development and advancement opportunities for educators in under-resourced schools and districts, slowing advancements in minority representation within educational leadership positions, and depriving students of the advantages that come from working with highly qualified and informed classroom instructors.

“Yearly [membership] fees that we pay may keep other people from participating, and time is always going to be every educator’s biggest monster. We don’t have enough time.”

– Elementary School Principal,
California

LIMITATIONS & CHALLENGES | Networks & Unmet Needs



Several practitioners agreed there is a need for access to relevant, curated resources and clear guidance on how to leverage these resources and move directly into action.

- Out-of-date or poorly organized information is a reason that educators may leave or discount the relevance or usefulness of a network, especially as such is seen as not progressing the capacity to implement change at the school or classroom level.
- More importantly, practitioners expressed frustration with networking experiences that focus too much on complaining about problems, and not enough on what to do or how to act on them to create change, and most value networks that are solutions-oriented.

“We have to do more than just sitting around and just talking about the problem. We also need to go and address the issues.”

– High School Math Teacher, Texas



NETWORK CAPACITY FOR CHANGE

“Networks are great at reminding people this is a call to action, that there's a reason you got in this position and not to forget what our role is as educators: We're here to make a difference in the lives of children.”

-Elementary School Principal, California

HOW DO PARTICIPANTS SEE NETWORKS' CAPACITY TO SUPPORT CHANGE, BOTH INDIVIDUALLY AND WITHIN THE BROADER K-12 COMMUNITY?

- Network engagement has strong potential to facilitate personal transformation by providing a source of motivational and inspiration.
- Networks also have strong potential for broader impacts by providing practitioners with resources that can shape school culture, coaching methods, and classroom tactics that lead to improved learning outcomes of students.

NETWORK CAPACITY FOR CHANGE | Personal Transformations



When asked to describe specific scenarios in which networking led to significant personal changes in their practices or mindsets, practitioners highlighted transformative conversations or experiences that would not have been likely or possible within their own school or district.

- Several practitioners highlighted an appreciation for events that allowed them to learn about promising practices in other districts that they could quickly bring back to implement in their classrooms and schools.
- Others emphasized the impact of informal networking events and resources on their personal mindsets about critical elements of school culture and minority student engagement.
- Principals especially emphasized that access to individuals outside their district allowed them to see what others were doing and push for change back home.
- Teachers, coaches, and principals alike reflected on the power of networks to remind them that they do this work to help the children they serve, and they look to their networks and the communities within them to stay positive and motivated.

"I've taught in the same school since I started teaching. It is a really large Southern California high school with a lot of diversity. Getting to hear from people who are in very different situations, whether it's a different location or a smaller or has different challenges ... I can learn from those different situations and apply it back here.

If you're just within your own group, then you might not get all the ideas that you can get when you connect outside of that bubble."

- High School Math Teacher, California

NETWORK CAPACITY FOR CHANGE | Broader Impact



Practitioners recognize the capacity of their preferred networks to make significant broader impacts in the lives of children and educators.

- For some, broader impacts come through peer feedback and resources to support changes in classroom practices, student-centered learning opportunities, and frameworks that enable school leadership and practitioners to collaborate on classroom-based changes
- Others cite the capacity of their networks to advocate for greater change at the state or national policy level, such as lobbying for legislative reforms, mobilizing to address outdated and biased instructional content and approaches, or partnering with communities to build positive student identities.
- Although there were fewer direct mentions of how access to networks specifically impacts math instruction, practitioner access to PD and problem-solving supports enable student-centered instruction and furthers efforts to improve equitable learning outcomes.

“The power of collaboration is something that makes change.

When you join networks, you understand that collaborating with others is the only way to get this work done, because this work is very taxing.”

- Middle School Principal, New York



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NEXT STEPS

NETWORKING INSIGHTS | Opportunities



Findings from this rapid study reveal a natural opportunity to tap into networks where communities are already established to better reach practitioners, share with them relevant and curated resources, and coach them on how to put innovative practices into place in their schools.

Across principal, teacher, and instructional coaches, we see opportunities to emphasize networking spaces that foster solution-driven mindsets and application-driven toolsets.

When reflecting on networks, teachers disregard communities that directly align with curriculum or supplemental materials; this suggests opportunities to expand framing of “networking” to explicitly include resource-centered groups and spaces.

With cost, time, and access being significant barriers to engagement, future efforts should aim to identify networks with a strong capacity for direct practitioner support, as well as to develop a clearer strategy around the shape of that support (ex: financial, personnel based, etc.), with particular attention to access and sustainability for practitioners serving Gates priority students.

Consider meeting the diverse needs of practitioners by developing a strategy of network support that is scaffolded to accommodate variation by role, content, and geography. To support principals, emphasize networks that excel at peer mentoring, connection and ideation space. To support teachers and coaches, consider networks that center instructional content and role, while still incorporating vital trust-building and personal relationship supports. These supports may act as table stakes for many practitioners to attach value to a network through deeper connection based on student demographics, curriculum and supplemental materials implementation, etc.



Professional Network Study

APPENDIX

METHODOLOGY | Overview of Study Flow & Focus



Study Recruitment: To conduct this study, study participants were recruited from the Community Insights Network Practitioner Panel. Focus was placed on identifying individuals who met the following criteria:

- Participant is a **Math classroom teacher, Math instructional coach, or principal**
- Participant lives and/or works in a Gates priority state: **CA, FL, NY, or TX**
- Participant supports **student populations in upper elementary – lower high school** (grades 5 – 9)



Study Format: Eligible study participants were asked to join a 60-minute, evening **virtual focus group discussion**. Due to scheduling constraints, the studies team also offered an **online journal** option for those unable to join a live discussion.



Study Focus: The questions in the focus groups and in the online journal aimed at **unpacking how participants engage with professional network engagement**, what the networks are that they are most drawn to, what are characteristics of those networks, and what are barriers that limit their network engagement.

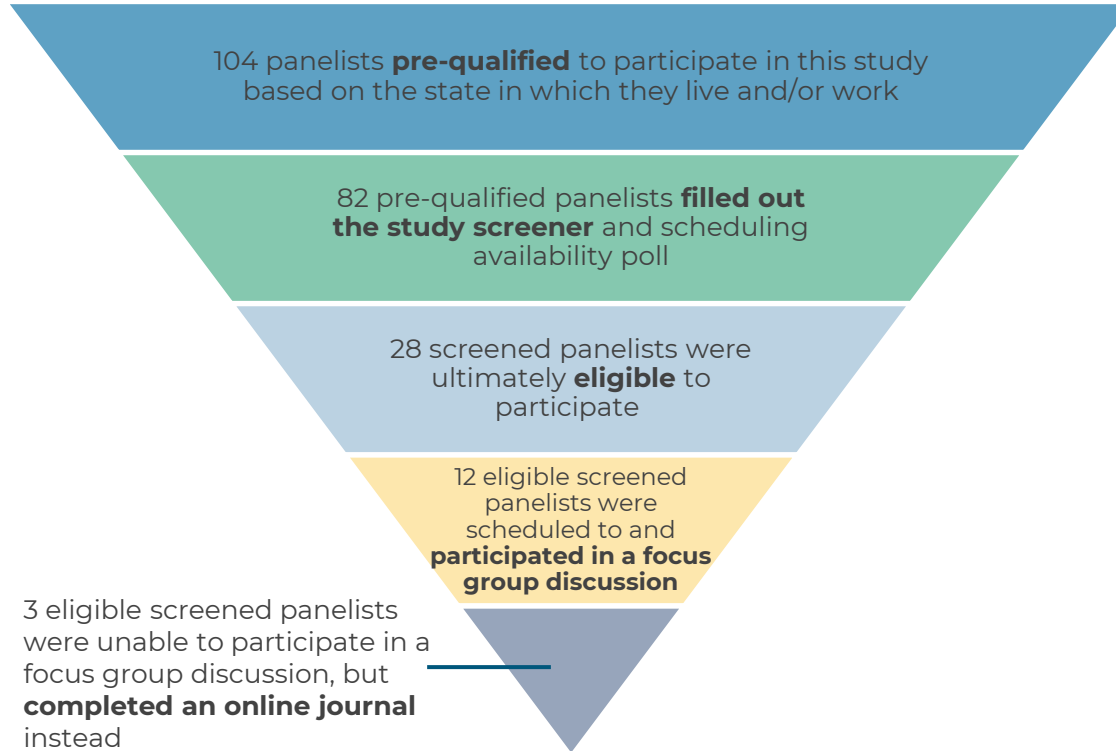


Study Analysis: After data collection was completed, the studies team delivered \$75 incentives to study participants in appreciation of the time they spent and experience they shared. And, finally, the studies team utilized **qualitative analysis methods in NVivo to identify themes across participant perspectives**. The culmination of this analysis has been presented here, in this study memo.

METHODOLOGY | Study Recruitment



Identifying and engaging eligible study participants followed the below eligibility and selection flow:



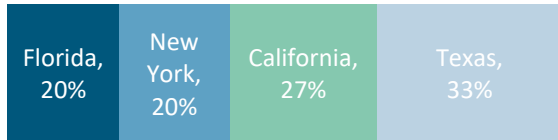
METHODOLOGY | Participant Eligibility



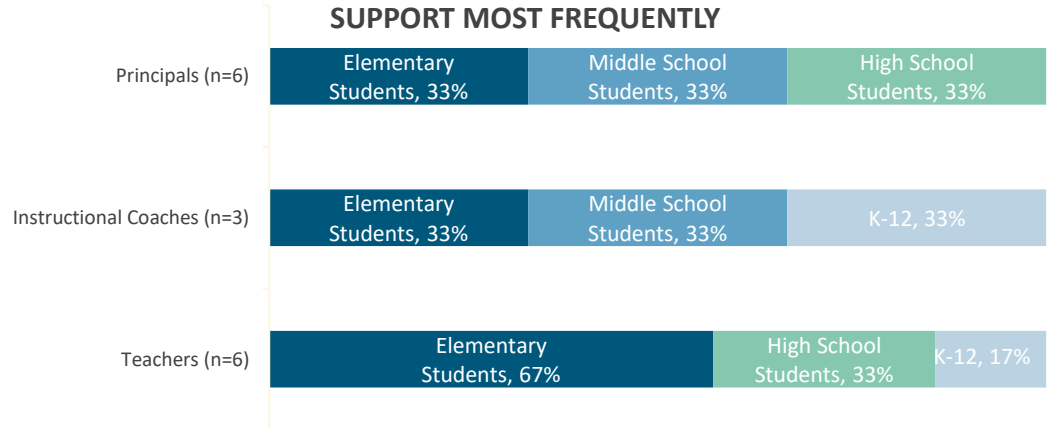
Below is a synthesis of the distribution of study participants based on their eligibility to join the study:

- Study participants were almost evenly distributed by living in/working in their respective Gates' priority state.
- Study participants represented experiences in serving students from a range of grades, some serving the full K-12 spectrum, and others particular grade bands. However, participants represented serving younger grades more than older grades.

STATE REPRESENTATION ACROSS STUDY PARTICIPANTS



GRADE BANDS STUDY PARTICIPANTS SUPPORT MOST FREQUENTLY

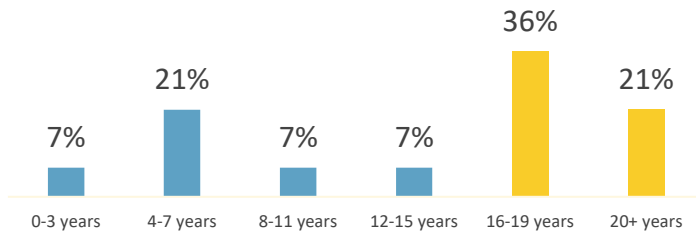


METHODOLOGY | Participant Profile

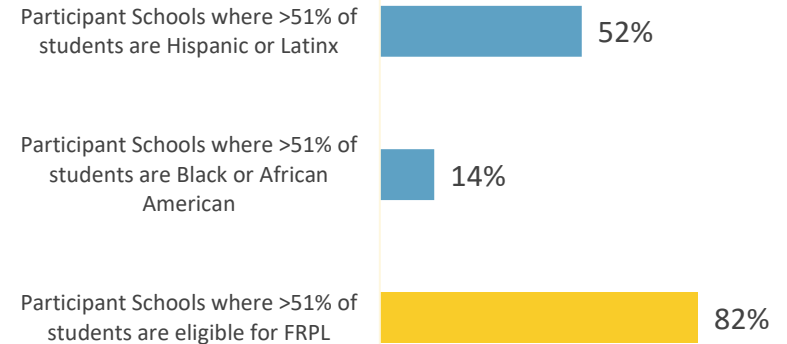


Overall, study participants were **highly experienced** individuals in the education space - most (57%) with 16 or more years of experience in their role. Additionally, almost all participants (82%) represented **lower-income schools**, where more than half of the student population is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

PARTICIPANT YEARS OF EXPERIENCE



PARTICIPANT SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS



METHODOLOGY | Study Formats

Table 2. Methods of engaging K-12 Practitioner Panel members.

METHOD	PURPOSE	TARGET PARTICIPANTS	INCENTIVE
Slack Exploration Posts	Explore how practitioners use networks to help inform focus group protocol design.	Member of the K-12 Practitioner Panel engaged in the Slack community	\$5 coffee on us for response to open-ended questions on Slack
60-Minute Focus Group	Collect in-depth insights into the various use of networks by math teachers, math instructional coaches, and principals in Gates priority states.	Five, 60-minute focus groups with approximately 25 individuals. Priority placement given to individuals who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize professional networks • Educate in a Gates priority state (CA, TX, FL, NY) • Serve at schools with 51+% of students who are Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, or eligible for free or reduced lunch • Grade 4-9 math teachers, math coaches, and principals 	\$75 <u>incentive</u>
Online Journals	Offer an additional method of engagement for participants due to challenges with aligning schedules for focus groups (namely principal demographic)	Those who were unable to find times to participate in live focus group sessions	\$75 <u>incentive</u>

METHODOLOGY | Learning Questions

To what extent are formal and informal out-of-school/district networks being used by math teachers, instructors, and principals?

- What formal and informal networks do practitioners use?
- What needs do these networks address for practitioners?
- What are the strengths and limitations of these networks?
- How do networks differ based on their member-base and purpose?
- Where else do educators in their state/position turn to for information?
- How does use of out-of-school/district networks compare to the use of in-school/district networks?

In what capacity do practitioners see these networks as contributing to changes in mindset and practices in the field?

- What types of behaviors does this network aim to influence, for who?
- What headwinds or tailwinds do members perceive the network as facing in trying to influence those behaviors?
- What role do networks play in equity and diversity within the field of education and students served?
- What support is needed in these networks so they can expand or improve their ability to influence practitioners?



THANK YOU!