



**SPREADING
INNOVATION**

CASE STUDY: Education partnerships

Best practice for spreading innovation:

Let the practitioners do it

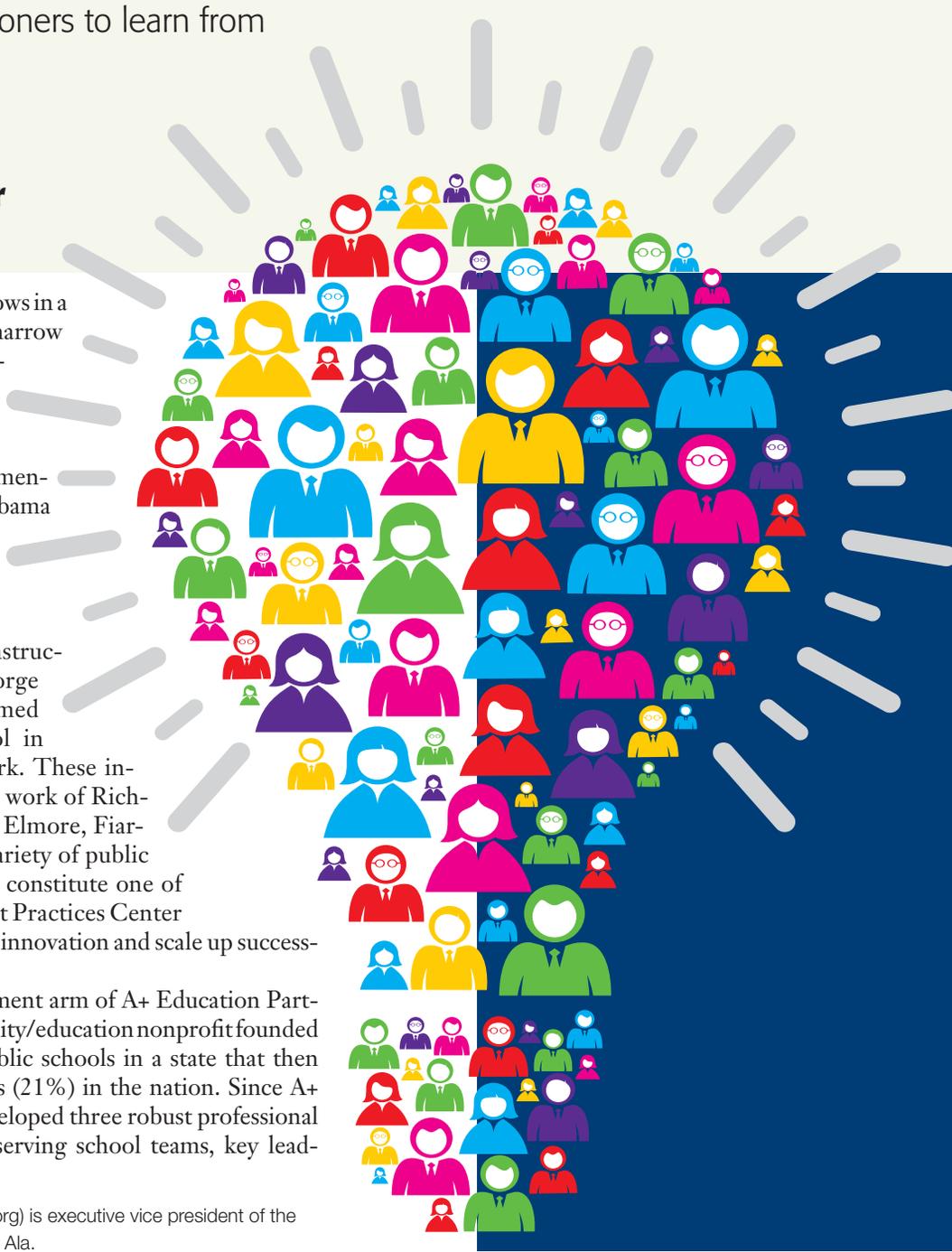
An Alabama nonprofit spreads best practices, especially around high-needs schools by enabling practitioners to learn from each other.

By Cathy Gassenheimer

As we sat by the bright wall of windows in a school media center overlooking the narrow streets of inner-city Mobile, Ala., I noticed a hand waving enthusiastically at one of the tables and looked that way. “I now understand what close reading actually *looks* like,” the elementary coordinator for a mid-state Alabama school district told the roomful of educators. “Before seeing it in the classrooms today, I couldn’t conceptualize it. It just seemed so hard.”

Thus began the debriefing of an Instructional Round event hosted by George Hall Elementary, a nationally acclaimed high-poverty, high-achieving school in our Powerful Conversations Network. These intensive daylong events, based on the work of Richard Elmore and his colleagues (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009) and held at a variety of public schools across Alabama each spring, constitute one of many strategies that the Alabama Best Practices Center (ABPC) uses to help educators spread innovation and scale up successful teaching and learning practices.

ABPC is the professional development arm of A+ Education Partnership, a statewide business/community/education nonprofit founded in 1991 to advocate for excellent public schools in a state that then had one of the highest illiteracy rates (21%) in the nation. Since A+ launched ABPC in 1999, we have developed three robust professional learning networks across the state (serving school teams, key lead-



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ers, and superintendents) to promote research-based best practices and local innovation that can accelerate student achievement and lead to success in college and careers.

A+ organized the Alabama Best Practices Center because its leaders saw great promise in forming authentic partnerships with educators at every level of the public school enterprise to inform state policy making and to resolve the disconnect between the intent of policy and its implementation.

Powerful standards

As ABPC began its work, the National Staff Development Council (now Learning Forward) released a comprehensive revision of its Standards for Staff Development (now known as the Standards for Professional Learning). Seeing the power of these new standards to drive improvements in instructional practices, we began working to connect more educators and schools to the standards framework. Although our original intent was to identify and recognize schools that were using professional learning practices aligned to the new standards, our work quickly morphed into a more collaborative and transformative process. Facilitators trained by ABPC met with small faculty groups in interested schools to discuss the new standards and develop measures to track a school's progress in implementing them. The characteristics of those discussions made our shared process easy to name: Powerful Conversations.

After facilitating 16 of these discussions, we convened the leadership of the participating schools and asked them to frankly appraise the value of the process. They took us at our word, and we learned a lesson that has forever changed and shaped the ABPC's work: When you listen to what educators want and partner in ways that help them achieve their own well-informed goals, amazing things can happen.

What did those 16 schools want? They wanted to meet with each other at a time and in a place devoted to professional learning. They wanted to learn from and inspire each other in ways that resulted in improved teaching and learning across all the participating schools. As a result, the substantial but still siloed discussions at individual schools gave way to the Powerful Conversations Network, a voluntary professional learning community that shares and pursues best practices in daylong gatherings and school visitations facilitated (but never dominated) by ABPC staff and consultants. Today, more than 12 years later, the Powerful Conversations Network is thriving with 175 schools involved in regional elementary and secondary activities each year and a companion Key Leaders Network made up of school and district leaders from 37 school systems.

What we learned

In the mid-2000s, ABPC participated in a project funded by Microsoft Partners in Learning designed to learn more about the successful scaling of education innovation. Our project eventually involved providing mostly online professional learning support to 40 teacher teams who would promote the spread of technology integration and 21st-century skills in their schools. While the success of our immediate project was modest, we gained significant insights into the challenges inherent in trying to scale innovative practices.

Here is some of what we've learned:

#1. Relationships matter.

Relationship building is key to deep and sustained change. We created the Powerful Conversations Network because we listened to teachers across the state who wanted to learn from each other. Their input informed the focus and organization for the Network, and participating schools — now numbering nearly 200 across the state — have a key voice in making decisions about the future direction of the professional learning experience.

The Key Leaders Network, composed of principals and district administrators from 37 Alabama districts, was created in 2005 after a meeting of schools participating in the Powerful Conversations Network. Principals wanted a way to involve their key district administrators to ensure alignment and a common vision for instructional improvement in their schools and districts.

Several years later, a group of superintendents approached us and asked us to form a Superintendent Leaders Network, which has become a “safe and trusted” place for district CEOs to investigate successful reforms, learn together, and share ideas. This high-level networking and relationship building also has helped smooth the way for enabling school-based educators to take the calculated risks inherent in scaling promising practices.

Through our work with these three Networks, we've learned that regardless of whether you're a statewide nonprofit promoting best practices or a government agency with a mission to sustain and improve public education, it's not enough to mandate change or provide information and technical assistance. Teachers and administrators have to understand the change, see it in action, if possible, and trust those who are working with them. They need to know that you have their best interest at heart, and they need to experience your willingness to listen, understand, and empathize.

The lesson learned in terms of scaling is that any new venture must be about those you're serving, not about what best suits your organization or those who manage it. The educators you seek to partner with must be the ones who help you set the tone, tenor, and topics. They must trust you enough to tell you when a partnership isn't working as well as it might and to be receptive when you provide the right amount of challenge and support (Drago-Severson, 2012) to help them grow and serve their students more effectively. This will not happen unless there is strong relational trust in place. In very significant ways, innovation spreads *through* relationships.

#2. Be nimble.

We learned early on to pursue fruitful partnerships at every opportunity. When the Alabama State Board of Education adopted the revised national professional development standards in 2001, we saw a pressing need to help educators and leaders learn about the new standards and then gauge where their school or district was in relation to the standards. So we stepped in. With the National Staff Development Council's help, we devised a facilitated self-assessment process to help schools benchmark against the standards. This work morphed into the Powerful Conversations Network as a response to the real need of our partners.

More recently, when Alabama adopted its College- and Career-Ready Standards (based on the Common Core State Standards framework), we once again saw the need to connect educators to information and support. The new standards created the opportunity for students to go deeper into the content, be more creative, and focus more on the “what” and “why” in addition to the “how.” For teachers who have relied on textbooks rather than standards, this is a major sea change. To accomplish change of this magnitude, we've found that the best place to start is by encouraging teachers to work and learn together. To help accelerate that process, our networks began to focus on implementing Alabama's new standards. In addition, beginning in the 2011-12 school year, we partnered with Alabama's education department to pilot a new instructional coaching model that would develop instructional partners to lead and facilitate collaborative professional learning.

Our newest idea is to launch a high-poverty school network. This concept emerged from listening to two principals of high-needs schools talking together at an ABPC-sponsored meeting, describing the special learning-related needs of students living in poverty and the specific best practices associated with academic and social-emotional learning in their settings. We plan to launch this new network during the 2013-14 school year as a partnership among schools to provide a safe and productive place for learning and dialogue.

#3. Learn from each other.

We approach all of our networks from a learner's stance. We plan and facilitate each meeting expecting to learn new things from those we serve. And we are very intentional about crafting opportunities at every one of our meetings for participants to learn from, inspire, and challenge each other. We never portray ourselves as the single (or even the best) source of know-how and wisdom. We try diligently to guarantee that the facilitators' time at professional learning sessions is designed to set the stage for participants' collegial learning and to provide guidance about the next learning activity. To introduce new research-based ideas and strategies, from time to time, we will include a "lecturette," but we try to limit these to no more than 10 minutes and/or connect the new content to relevant small group activities.

We've learned that there is no substitute for authentic dialogue among participants. When one principal from a high-poverty, high-achieving school falls into a deep conversation with a colleague from another part of the state who is still endeavoring to turn around her high-poverty school, we are purely the facilitators. We are not the people they have a lot to learn from — *they* are those people.

#4. Make the state small.

Closely tied to both relationship building and lateral learning is providing participants with a network of people across the state who have similar jobs and face similar challenges. Jennifer Douthit, principal of Martin Luther King Elementary School, a high-poverty school in Huntsville, recently noted that the instructional partner pilot made the state smaller for her by giving her access to peers from across the state who she could tap for information.

While the ABPC staff and consultants are ac-

tive professional learners who race to stay abreast of what is working for students and schools everywhere, we are first and foremost networkers who spend a great deal of time becoming aware of what's going on across our own state. Our ability to leverage that awareness and connect educators to each other in ways that enable them to share firsthand knowledge is critical to the success and spread of our networks.

#5. Stay abreast of research and best practices.

Educators in Alabama have come to expect that ABPC will point them to compelling and relevant professional literature and best practice. A small high-poverty urban district calls us (tongue-in-cheek) its R&D and PD department. Even though they say that in jest, we take this role very seriously because we understand that practicing educators don't have time to read every new book (nor do we!) or research every article available.

#6. Encourage reflection.

Almost 80 years ago, John Dewey (1933) noted that we learn when we reflect on our experiences. Giving participants time to reflect and dialogue about what they are learning is an important component of our professional learning design. We believe innovation cannot spread unless those who are experiencing it make a habit of reflection and give voice to what they are learning on a regular basis.

In our newest venture, the Instructional Partners pilot, we expect our instructional partners to submit weekly reflections in a secure space on a web site created for them. Project facilitators read the reflections and respond by posing questions to prompt deeper thinking. While time-consuming, instructional partners speak to the value of having to take time each week to look back at what worked, what didn't, and what they might need to consider as they plan for the upcoming week. They also value the "wonderings" posed by ABPC facilitators, which invite them to think more deeply about a particular idea or issue.

As you design or expand your professional learning initiatives, be mindful of the importance of providing opportunities for participants to spend time thinking about and discussing what they are learning. We know effective questioning is a powerful leadership strategy (Walsh & Sattes, 2010). One simple, but very effective tool that we often use is this: Here's what (I learned); so what (does

it mean to me and my work?); now what (are my next steps?).

And as a way to model giving voice and spreading the energy for change that can come when we hear others reflecting on their work, ABPC staff will sometimes invite Instructional Partners participants to work with our communications consultant and translate what they are learning into public writing that we share on our ABPC blog (www.best-practicescenter.org/blog/). In the past two years, we've published dozens of these reflective stories, which are seen by hundreds of other Alabama educators through our social media networking.

Innovation spreads through relationships.

#7. Live it.

Our work with the Instructional Partners pilot helped us further solidify our belief that we like to work through partnerships. Far too often, teachers are told what to do, or an expert enters their classroom like Mighty Mouse to save the day, when actually what the teacher wants is someone to listen to their concerns and build on their strengths.

Jim Knight (2011) reminds us that “equality is central within any partnership. Partners do not decide for each other; they decide together. In a true partnership, one partner does not tell the other what to do; they discuss, dialogue, and then decide together. Partners realize that they are one half of a whole, and, in healthy partnerships, they find that they are a lot smarter when they listen to their partner” (p. 29). By acting as a partner, instructional partners are finding more doors open to them and more teachers willing to change. Teachers feel valued and see that they have a voice in decisions about their classrooms and their schools. When that happens, partnerships begin to blossom into networked communities.

Many years ago, Dennis Sparks, then executive director of the National Staff Development Council, helped ABPC understand the importance of building capacity and not building codependency. As you work to scale your project, he told us, remember that you can measure your success by the evidence that you are empowering others and helping them align and reach their goals.

If we ever put our purpose on a poster, we'll quote Dennis Sparks. ■

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“I keep their attention by simply saying ‘Jersey Shore’ every 30 seconds.”