



Building an Interactive Sustainable Network: A Briefing Paper

**Prepared for the
Access, Equity and Quality in Arts Learning Conference
June 18-20, 2009
Seattle, Washington**

Introduction

NETWORK (net-wǝrk) (*n*): an interconnected or interrelated chain, group, or system.

As the work of the various community-based collaboratives represented in the *Access, Equity and Quality in Arts Learning* Conference matures, the focus logically shifts toward processes and mechanisms that can give the work lasting value through sustainability of programs and outcomes. In furtherance of this aim, the Arts Education Partnership (AEP) has conducted research necessary to launch the development of an interactive sustainable network that would encompass the existing work of these collaboratives and help build this lasting value.

The network, as proposed, would be designed to connect the collaboratives to one another, be a repository for tools and resources and serve as the nexus for the creation of new knowledge. This briefing paper, the result of the research, was prepared to give focus to discussions and planning that will lead to the development of such a network.

This document is divided into three sections reflecting the following essential ideas:

1. Current knowledge gained through work of the Ford Arts Ed Initiative, similar initiatives, and models of existing networks can be used to lay the groundwork for an interactive sustainable network of community-based collaboratives.
2. The essential structures and functions of such a network can be defined and clarified.
3. A road map for the essential processes for developing the network can be identified and elaborated.

1. The Groundwork

Over the last four years, the Arts Education Partnership has worked with the Ford Arts Ed grantee sites to enhance their organizational capacity, strengthen the nature and extent of their partnerships, and improve the quality of their arts education program development and delivery. AEP uses a variety of strategies to accomplish these goals, including initiative-wide convenings, site-specific technical assistance, peer-to-peer coaching and information sharing, and director-only seminars. A network is a next stage in the logical progression of AEP's work with the Ford sites, and it may be for other sites participating in the Access, Equity and Quality in Arts Learning Conference (AEQ), as well. A network can both augment and amplify the work that has taken place so far, in the following ways:

- A network will expand the capacity of the individual sites to conduct their work at a higher level. Each of the sites, irrespective of its funding source and sponsorship, can more effectively realize its goals and expand and deepen its impact through connection with other sites. Such connection can facilitate sharing of knowledge and innovation, make effective practices more readily available, and help build a supportive and collegial community of persons dedicated to a common vision of universal arts learning.
- A network can help disseminate effective practices, tools, and research findings broadly, adding further value. This outcome significantly amplifies the ultimate impact of the various AEQ initiatives, offering the possibility of leveraging the overall education reform movement nationally. It can do this by:
 - Publishing successful program models, practices, curricula, and assessments
 - Disseminating research findings in relation to the impact of systemic arts-integrated teaching and learning on the success of schools and students
 - Impacting educational policies at the federal, state, and district level
- A network will meet the overall needs of the various foundation-level initiatives for the sustainability of their programs. A network can bring about overall sustainability, defined as the capacity to continue work on an ongoing basis, usually with little or no continued outside funding. A network can have this impact through:
 - The existence of a viable infrastructure that supports communication
 - The development of an overall culture of mutual connectedness and support
 - Innovative, creative alignments among the various needs and resources across a range of programs
 - Facilitation of innovation and creativity in the solution of common problems, including the development of new solutions and the flexible adaptation of existing knowledge

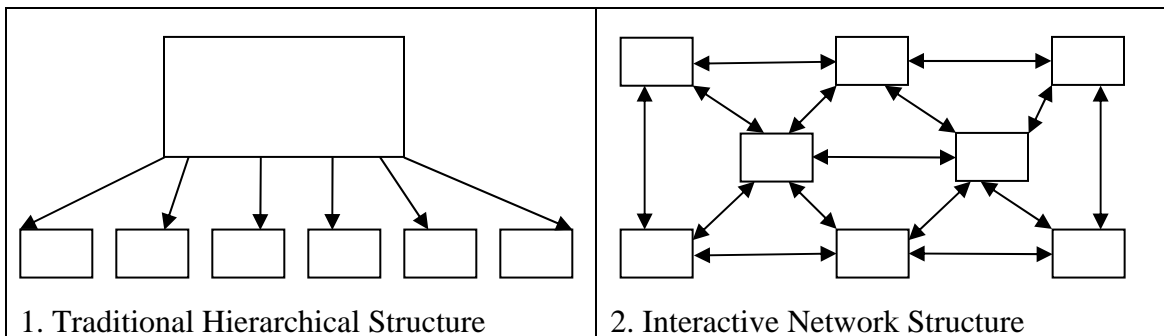
2. A System of People and Knowledge

The essential structures and functions of an interactive sustainable network can be defined and clarified. Fortunately, many examples of successful networks exist and provide useful information. Our research and benchmarking of these successful networks reveals much about the essential components that any successful network must have as well as the steps that are required in order to bring a network into being.

Essential Components of a Network

Fundamentally, a network is a community of people who share mutual or at least consonant goals and the ability to help one another through information and resources. Many membership organizations are like networks, in that they regularly communicate with their affiliates. The essential difference, in our view, is in the ways in which information is shared. In an organization, information most often flows in linear fashion from top to bottom or less often from bottom to top. In a network, information flows in many directions, facilitating peer-to-peer interaction.

Figure 1: How information flows hierarchically and in an interactive network



Networks have the following characteristics:

- *People and organizations* that work purposefully toward one or more shared goals (e.g., ensuring that every student has a quality education that includes the arts)
- *Programs* that approach shared needs or problems with intended solutions
- *Resources* that include data, knowledge, and tools
- *Infrastructure* that consists of formal and informal agreements, memberships, affiliations, and technological support structures
- *Continuous research, innovation, and evaluation* that facilitate organizational learning and improvement

Steps Required to Form a Network

Most of these components already exist in the wealth of ongoing practice of the AEQ initiatives. The steps required to transform this practice into a network may be relatively

accessible and feasible in the short term. In our analysis, these steps are as follows:

Cultural Change

An organization's culture gives it a guiding perspective, orients it toward action, and makes some outcomes more likely than others. In this sense, cultural change is a key to the development of a sustainable network. Currently, the perspective of the various AEQ sites tends to be local. They were generally conceived to reflect the needs of their urban areas and to develop metropolitan—i.e., local—solutions. This perspective is a natural phase of the origin and development of the individual programs.

As some of our interviewees in the Ford Arts Ed Initiative have told us, the shift to a more regional or national perspective represents a later development, one that is a part of the evolution of the network, and one that entails a cultural shift. In the words of one of the grantees: “A sustainable network means changing the mindset to think about the work you are doing as a network and not as an organization. We are all working towards the same goal. With a network, we have to create a broader community.”

Alignment of Needs and Resources

The alignment of needs and resources across a network reflects four ideas:

1. Problems and areas of interest are similar across the member sites, but specific solutions and adaptations vary from one site to another.
2. A solution that is developed at one site may effectively meet a need at another, possibly with some modification.
3. Sharing of resources would involve processes of flexible adaptation and purposing.
4. This collaboration would represent an added value for the network that would drive sustainability.

As an example, AEP recently participated in a joint meeting of the Alameda County Office of Education/Alliance for Arts Learning Leadership and the University of California/CSU East Bay Arts Education Initiative. These two initiatives not only share contiguous geography but also have come to see their work as complementary. In this meeting, the conversation focused in part on how the two initiatives can approach the serious project of systemic change. Individually, each initiative can bring change to bear at one or more points in the system. (For example, ACOE-AALL works with teachers already in their classrooms, while the AEI focuses on the preservice training of teachers.) Together, they can begin to leverage change across a much broader range of policy and practice.

A Quest for Innovation

The AEQ sites have in common a constant quest for innovation. Indeed, they inherently work in a realm of partial knowledge. The current education reform movement in the United States is approximately 25 years old, beginning with *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, but the body of research-based knowledge is surprisingly fragmentary. Even more, the application of research to drive policy is curiously absent. If this were not the case, the presence of strong arts-infused reform efforts and programs would be consistent throughout our educational system. This fragmentary knowledge and imperfect use of knowledge can be addressed through the network.

The essence of both the Ford and Wallace Initiatives is improvement of educational access, equity, and quality through the arts, with a special focus by Wallace on expanding opportunities for youth through the arts and exploring learning opportunities beyond the school day. These are important throughlines that can guide the network; however, the network may also evolve over time as new imperatives arise and as the nature of educational reform changes over time. New research and effective practices will point the way to new wellsprings of educational renewal. The network must be cognizant of these changes and reflect them in its evolution.

A Viable Infrastructure

The backbone of a network will consist of one or more—probably a number of—informational technology tools. These tools meet the following general functions.

- Communication, both synchronous and asynchronous, for as-needed sharing of knowledge
- Data warehousing, for storing, sorting, and accessing information
- Interactive information, not just archived, but collaborative
- Shared workspaces, such as webinars, conferencing, wikis, etc.

3. The Roadmap: A Multistage Process

As part of its ongoing work with the Ford Foundation, the AEP has identified the essential process for developing the network and begun the preliminary work necessary to its implementation. This development unfolds in four stages:

Stage 1: Building a Foundation

- AEP is beginning a needs assessment to determine the qualities, conditions, and components essential to the development of the sustainable network. In the interactive session of the AEQ Conference, AEP is asking the following questions:
 - *What problems or issues do you encounter in your work, for which a national network might be useful?*
 - *How would you use a national network to address these problems or issues?*
 - *What characteristics would a network have in order to facilitate these uses?*

- *What resources (e.g., staffing, funding, materials) would your organization need to provide in order to participate in the network?*

Stage 2: Developing the Structure

- AEP is designing and testing a technological infrastructure for the network. While no one can predict the future of the rapidly expanding information technology landscape, it will clearly be interactive. AEP will launch the technological infrastructure in stages that will allow for experimentation and retooling as lessons are learned. Basecamp is an online, interactive project management tool used for the last few years by the Ford Arts Ed Management team. A new Basecamp account will be created for the Ford grantee sites as a space for downloadable tools, templates, communication, and other resources.
- AEP will provide training and technical assistance to help the sites grow more comfortable with these technological tools for communication and information sharing, and in turn we will learn from them the most helpful elements of the tools as well as the gaps that remain.
- AEP will develop an interactive bank of tools and resources that will exist on its website. These tools and resources, many generated and tested by users, will include evaluation protocols, assessment instruments, survey forms, and other ready-to-use templates.

Stage 3: Implementation

- The primary goal of the network is to connect organizations, resources and ideas. Building on its previous work with the Ford Arts Ed Initiative, AEP will expand networking opportunities beyond face-to-face convenings to include interactive webinars and peer-to-peer exchanges. These networking opportunities, along with technical assistance and online tools and resources, will capitalize on existing and emerging relationships to strengthen the cultural shift among the sites toward more collegial work and greater sharing of information. This culture of shared knowledge and collaboration is fundamental to a sustainable network. AEP will use the on-going face-to-face convenings to continuously gauge the extent to which network members are moving toward the realization of shared goals and aligning their programs with the needs or problems of relevant audiences.

Stage 4: Expansion

- The AEP will develop and implement a plan for bringing on additional community-based collaboratives as members of the sustainable network. The plan conceivably could include these stages:
 - A core group consisting of the fully established collaboratives that are funded by the Ford Foundation, the Wallace Foundation, the Hewlett Foundation, and the Heinz Endowments.

- Broadening of the network with the addition of other sites, even though some of them are not yet fully formed collaboratives.
- The institutionalization of the network as a partially self-sustaining entity.

A key ingredient of the Expansion Phase plan will be continued research on the optimum structure, format, and content of the interactive sustainable network. Results of the research will be used for continuous refinement and revitalization of the network as a value-added entity.

Conclusion

The work of school reform has generally encompassed two imperatives, often overlapping, sometimes even contradictory. The first imperative is the standards-based reform movement, whose focus has generally been top-down accountability. This focus, while enforcing standards, has often brought with it rigidity instead of innovation.

The countervailing imperative has involved the development of model programs with local autonomy and the capacity for innovation and the agency to bring about change. While successful locally, such programs have often failed to impact the overall educational policy system at a national or even statewide basis.

At AEP, we see the future as comprising a hybrid model in which networks connect autonomous sites into a whole that delivers innovative solutions whenever and wherever they are needed. The combined power of numerous initiatives and programs brings with it the potential for systemic change.

The network projected for the AEQ sites seems to be an example of this third way.

About This Report

This plan is based on research conducted by AEP staff in 2009 and ongoing throughout the project. This research has included interviews with staff of all nine of the Ford Arts Ed sites; site visits and observations; and an online search of websites and documents related to organizational networks. For further information, contact Michael Sikes (michaels@ccsso.org) or Sarah Scott (sarahs@ccsso.org).

Ford Arts Ed Pages on the AEP website: <http://aep-arts.org/fordartsed/>