

**Key points:**

- Kansas Learning Network brings together cohorts of LEAs identified for improvement to develop their reform plans
- District participants credit program for creating a collaborative community where LEAs help one another analyze best practices
- Network using ARRA funds to expand to 17 districts

**Kansas school improvement collaborative fosters interdistrict planning**

The school improvement process can be a lonely enterprise for school districts, but to leverage the wisdom found among people faced with the same predicament, the [Kansas Education Department](#) has created an environment where 17 school districts are helping each other get out of [NCLB](#) accountability.

The state ED used [American Recovery and Reinvestment Act](#) and [Title I School Improvement](#) funds last year to expand the [Kansas Learning Network](#) from a pilot program composed of five districts to include a dozen other LEAs that will work together to develop improvement plans.

[Turner Unified School District #202](#) Superintendent Michelle Sedler told educators at the recent [National Title I Conference](#) in Washington, D.C., that the districts exchange ideas about what has worked or has not worked well in their schools.

For instance, Turner has a guided principal walk-through program that helps administrators understand what to look for in classrooms with ELL students.

"We'll tell you what we're doing with walk-throughs," Sedler said. "And you tell us what you're doing."

Eric Punswick, associate superintendent for [Leavenworth Public Schools](#) , said his district has benefited from joining the collaborative this year. Turner and Leavenworth school officials did not know one another before; they now talk regularly to share best practices.

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**Network functions**

The initial networking group comprised two small and three very large districts including Turner (the smallest district), [Garden City](#) , [Kansas City](#) , [Topeka](#) and [Wichita](#) (the largest district), representing 19.7 percent of the state's students.

Consultants from [Cross & Joftus](#) facilitate the network and assist LEAs in their data analysis. They conduct teacher surveys and visit the LEAs for classroom observations. They also provide technical assistance, including training school administrators on how to conduct their own needs assessments, use data for instruction and teacher professional development, and leverage available Title I and IDEA funding for program improvement.

Cross & Joftus President Scott Joftus explained that the districts are grouped in cohorts based on their geographic region.

Network meetings three times a year establish "peer support and pressure," Joftus said, because the districts each critique others' improvement plans, identifying both strengths and weaknesses.

State officials explain that after one year, "four out of the five pilot-year districts and the state agency are tackling the issue of coherence and doing so with the backing of their boards and the teachers' union; and all districts are embracing the art of classroom observation as a critical tool in the improvement of instruction."

## Program expansion

As the program enters its second year, Kansas is looking for ways to sustain the model and has added implementation coaches to serve in 32 schools in the 17 districts participating in the KLN. To facilitate teamwork, the districts are separated into three smaller cohorts.

## Finding the money

The network is funded for the next two years using Title I and IDEA dollars provided to the state through ARRA. Districts pay only for travel, said Colleen Riley, director of special education services with the Kansas ED.

"We wanted to make sure there was a very large incentive to participate," she said. There are "no excuses, funding-wise, for not participating."

Punswick said providing funding enticed districts to join the network, especially because local investment would have been difficult. "I know our board would not have agreed if they had to pay for it," he said.

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