

CASE STUDY: Partners in School Innovation

Partners in School Innovation (Partners) is a school support organization that partners with schools and districts to “transform teaching and learning...so that every student thrives.” Since 1993, Partners has worked with 25 schools and districts nationally, reaching over 1 million students. The organization intentionally seeks out and supports the most challenged public systems in the country, using an intensive embedded coaching model to build adult capacity to act as [change agents](#) who lead, teach, and learn in service of educational equity.

This case explores how Partners’s leaders have refined the organization’s internal structure to ensure that strategy development, ground-level implementation, and structured learning efforts inform each other in real time.

Eliminate structural barriers between strategy development and implementation

Structurally, leaders have designed the organization so that the staff driving strategy and staff leading ground-level implementation interact frequently and substantively across a variety of contexts. Leaders have:

- **Developed leadership roles that span strategy and implementation.** Most of Partners’s national leaders — staff charged with developing organizational strategy — have direct experience implementing the organization’s support model in schools and districts, with a number of central leaders sitting in roles that actively straddle national and regional work.
- **Included ground-level stakeholders directly in strategy spaces.** Partners’s leaders have, over time, shifted participation models in key strategy spaces to increase transparency and more strongly integrate ground-level voice into formal decision-making structures. Most recently, the organization established rotating roles filled by elected implementers on several national planning teams. This helps ensure that strategy decisions are directly and immediately responsive to ground-level perspective.
- **Built strong andon structures.** Partners’s robust monthly schedule of intra- and inter-team learning spaces ([see page 14 of the full Partners case](#)) — along with a cultural expectation that all staff participate in organizational improvement — allow staff members to quickly raise the alarm when the organization’s partnerships strategy isn’t functioning as anticipated. These spaces are supplemented by several technological tools: Mighty Networks, a social networking platform where staff can post questions, great ideas, and flag issues, and the organization’s Help Desk, a single email where staff can email any concern or request for support, large or small.

- **Created cross-functional, goal-oriented teams.** When misalignments in strategy and practice emerge, Partners’s leaders task temporary, cross-team and -region working groups with learning about and attending to challenges. Leaders provide support for these efforts — asking questions, furnishing resources, offering advice, and stepping in to help make tricky decisions as needed — but ultimately get out of the way to let proximate staff lead improvement. Once a team’s immediate goals are accomplished, members assess and disband or set new goals, in the latter case often adjusting the team’s membership in response to changing needs.

Embed collaborative learning into daily practice

Since the organization’s inception, Partners’s leaders have protected time and space for collaborative learning. A shared improvement methodology, [Results-Oriented Cycles of Inquiry](#) (ROCI), scaffolds and provides a shared language for both the day-and-a-half of formal, cross-functional learning each week and inquiry spaces and daily improvement activity. All staff commit to applying ROCI not just to their individual, team, and partner development efforts but also to organizational improvement.

To support productive collaborative learning, leaders have:

- **Create a clear, consistent structure and purpose for each learning space.** To ensure that each of the organization’s core priorities receive equal due, leaders have developed a robust and highly structured schedule of learning sessions (see Table 1 below). To foster stronger collaboration, leaders have, over time, increased the number of learning sessions devoted to cross-team, cross-functional inquiry.
- **Co-developed an organizational learning agenda.** To bring alignment across these learning spaces and routines, leaders have worked with staff to develop a shared scope and sequence for internal learning — grounded in the organization’s core [partnership implementation strategy](#). This agenda aligns each month’s schedule of internal learning sessions to a common program priority. For example, early in the school year, when coaching is top of mind in most partnerships, the national team focuses collaborative learning sessions around various dimensions of that competency: e.g., Approach Essentials meetings on the basics of coaching, whole group learning on goal-setting with coachees, and data dives on tracking progress on coaching competencies. The move to more strongly align learning sessions around a common agenda opened avenues for the national leadership team to foster stronger communication and collaboration across the organization.