

Practical Leadership

Improving the Schools of Today

Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Personal Learning Networks

In a Nutshell

School leadership is a demanding job, one where you're expected to stay up-to-date on the latest information impacting students and their learning, on the law and its implications for your school, and on curricular and instructional innovations. But, too often, the demands of the job mean that little time is available to devote to your own professional learning.

The good news is that technology has made staying connected far easier than it has ever been. It's now possible to create your own personalized Personal Learning Network (PLN) that links you to the information, tools and resources you find most helpful. This brief will describe a Personal Learning Network and how to create one that meets the unique needs of your job, and your school (Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011; Williamson & Johnston, 2012).

Your Own Personal Learning Network

A Personal Learning Network (PLN) is an online system to help one take charge of and manage their own learning. A PLN is a relatively new term that grows out of the easy access to online social media tools to build a network of colleagues and friends who can support one another's learning.

Leaders have always networked and sought advice and assistance from colleagues and friends. But those "traditional" networks were often confined to colleagues in one's own organization or personal friends. Those networks provided an opportunity to talk, share ideas, and offer suggestions about one another's work., exactly what the new virtual network will do.

Social media technology allows a leader to expand on these "traditional" networks by creating a virtual network that allows you to gather information and get responses to issues in a real-time environment. By creating your own PLN you can customize your contacts and the information you access. You can interact with and learn from colleagues all over the country, even all around the world. You can join the interaction or you can choose to just read and consider the ideas. That's one of the benefits of a virtual network, your ability to personalize the resources you access and control the amount of interaction.

Here are some of the most commonly cited benefits of a PLN:

- one-stop access to resources and information;
- ability to search for new tools and innovative practices;
- pose questions and hear from colleagues from all over the world;
- gather thoughtful suggestions on your ideas and projects;
- learn about tools and strategies that strengthen your leadership;
- prompt you to think more deeply about your work.

Most importantly people appreciate the ability to customize the information their receive and to control their level of interaction.

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Creating Your Customized PLN

One of the values of a PLN is that it can become your “one stop” source for information. You can create links to your favorite professional organizations, to blogs written by some of your favorite authors or someone who spoke at a conference, or to sites that deal with a current issue in your school. The resources are “virtually” unlimited. Here are five steps to creating your own PLN.

Step 1 – Determine Your Focus

Spend some time thinking about where you might want to start. What’s something you want to know more about? What’s a topic of discussion in your school? What’s an organization, or a person, you’d like to stay connected to?

You may want to think about those individuals and groups you turn to when you want information about an issue in your school. Perhaps it’s a professional organization like ASCD, NASSP, NAESP, or AASA. It might be a site with information about a program in your school like Oregon GEAR UP or AVID. It might even be the blog of an author or speaker who you found informative. Regardless, determine an area of interest to focus your PLN.

Step 2 – Create an Account for Your PLN

Probably the easiest way to build a PLN is to create a Twitter (www.twitter.com) account. It’s easy to discount Twitter as a tool for sharing minutia. But it can also be a powerful way to connect with professional colleagues. The authors have Twitter accounts and use them only for their own professional learning. We separate our professional learning from our personal contacts. We don’t “tweet” but, instead, use Twitter to access current information that helps us in our work.

Another easy way to create a PLN, and maintain a reading list, is feedly (www.feedly.com). It’s a service that allows you to easily search for topics and then click on “+feedly” to add the site to your reading list. Google also offers a set of tools for creating a PLN (<http://sites.google.com/site/buildingapln/>) that is easy to use and helps get your PLN organized. *Once a Teacher* (<http://tinyurl.com/olousp>) also provides tools for creating a PLN.

Step 3 – Find Your Links

Once you have your account it’s time to find the people or organizations with whom you want to connect. Start by doing a search to identify people or groups that are interested in the same topic. Narrow or expand your search, if needed, to identify links. Bookmark the sites you find of greatest interest or use a tool like Feedly (www.feedly.com) to create a reading list that will send you automatic updates from the sites.

Step 4 – Determine Your Level of Participation

Part of joining a network is to both learn and share information. Most people move through a set of predictable stages when they first create their PLN. At first, they remain in the background, reading, listening, and learning. As they become more comfortable with the technology they become more active participants. They evaluate their contacts and edit their network to assure the right balance between their own learning and their personal and professional lives. That’s one of the benefits of a PLN, the ability to tailor and customize both the information you receive and your level of involvement.

Many people share links to articles they’ve read, to presentations they’ve seen, to videos they’ve watched or to a tool they find helpful. That’s an easy way to join the conversation and become comfortable with a virtual network.

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Step 5 – Manage Your Network

It's important to monitor your involvement. Just like reading a journal, you don't have to read everything that is shared. But you will want to scan the links and see what might contribute to your own learning. A few minutes every day, or every other day, helps you manage your involvement. Ignoring the PLN can lead to feeling totally overwhelmed because of the posts and links you've received. It's the same as letting your favorite journal or set of books pile up while waiting to be read.

Summary

A Personal Learning Network has become an engaging tool for staying current and up-to-date on issues impacting your school and your leadership. As a virtual tool it allows you to access resources and information anytime, anywhere. That's a critical benefit for very busy principals.

Some of Our Favorite Links

Blogs

Eric Sheninger, *A Principal's Reflections* (<http://esheninger.blogspot.com>)

Mel Riddle (NASSP), *The Principal Difference* (<http://www.scoop.it/u/mel-riddle>)

Scott McLeod, *Dangerously Irrelevant* (<http://dangerouslyirrelevant.org/>)

Education Week Blogs (15 choices including School Law, Leadership, Curriculum Matters, Technology, Working with Parents) (<http://www.edweek.org/ew/section/blogs/index.html>)

Professional Organizations

ASCD (www.ascd.org)

National Assn. of Secondary School Principals (www.nassp.org)

National Assn. of Elementary School Principals (www.naesp.org)

Association for Middle Level Education (www.amle.org)

American Assn. of School Administrators (www.aasa.org)

Networks

ASCD Edge (<http://ascdedge.ascd.org/>) – A free social network on current educational issues

Edutopia (www.edutopia.org) – Authors discuss contemporary technology issues

Additional Online Resources

The Educator's PLN – An existing PLN for teachers and school leaders.

<http://edupln.ning.com/>

EduBlogs – An easy to use site for creating a PLN.

<http://teacherchallenge.edublogs.org/creating-a-pln>

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How to Create a Robust and Meaningful PLN – An article describing how to create, develop and nurture your PLN.

<http://tinyurl.com/avkrft7>

5 Things You Can Do to Begin Developing Your PLN – An article that walks you through the process of creating your own PLN

<http://tinyurl.com/5qm5b8>

Print Resources

Richardson, W. & Mancabelli, R. (2011). *Personal Learning Networks: using the Power of Connections to Transform Education*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

Scheninger, E. (2014). *Digital Leadership: Changing Paradigms for Changing Times*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Williamson, R. & Johnston, J. H. (2012). *The School Leader's Guide to Social Media*. New York: Routledge Education.

This *Research into Practice* brief was prepared by Practical Leadership, LLC and authored by Ronald Williamson, Professor of Educational Leadership at Eastern Michigan University and Howard Johnston, Professor Secondary Education at the University of South Florida. This brief is prepared for use by principals and school staff in Oregon GEAR UP schools.

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