

## PROFILE

# Consortium on Chicago School Research: 8/9 Teacher Network

## What they are doing:

In 2012, a report titled *Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners* pointed out that although most educators understood the importance of helping students become effective learners, they did not know very much about how teachers and other adults could provide that help. The bulk of the paper, written by Professors Camille Farrington, Melissa Roderick, and several of their colleagues at the [University's Consortium on Chicago School Research](#) (CCSR), was devoted to exploring and explaining how noncognitive factors lead to improvements in academic performance. Those factors include *behaviors*, such as attending class and doing homework; *academic perseverance*, such as self-discipline; *mindsets*, such as feeling that they can succeed; *learning strategies*, such as study skills; and *social skills*, such as cooperation and empathy.

The paper generated a lot of interest and prompted CCSR to launch the 8/9 Teacher Network (89TN) “research/practice project” focused on helping teachers apply the research synthesized in the paper to their teaching. The project also aimed to support teachers in creating and testing strategies and tools that could help other teachers—in Chicago and beyond—do the same. 89TN includes a network of 35 eighth- and ninth-grade teachers across seven Chicago Public Schools. CCSR recruited schools into the network through an application process, and then worked with each school to recruit teachers. In some schools, CCSR works with all of the teachers in the eighth- or ninth-grade level; in other schools, a subset of teachers participate.

Once work began, network participants and staff quickly found that before they could create a replicable professional development model to help teachers teach students how to become effective learners, they first had to help the teachers themselves climb a steep learning curve. That is, in order to enact changes in their practice and in their classrooms, teachers needed extensive support in developing their *own* mindsets and behaviors.

During its first year, 89TN focused on building teachers' mindsets and sense of self-efficacy. This took place against a backdrop of school system strikes, multiple CEOs, school closings, and implementation of new standards, all

creating a challenging work environment. To help teachers build confidence, 89TN arranged visits to schools with models of practices and environments that unlocked the mindsets and behaviors of effective learners. In part, this was to learn from effective teachers and in part to see that incorporating these practices into teaching was possible and could lead to more effective learners. 89TN also asked teachers to read more about the research findings and facilitated meetings every other month where network participants could reflect, collectively, on what they were learning. In between, teachers met individually with Program Director Ann Szekely for one-on-one coaching.

One important success in the first year was creating a safe environment for professional learning among the teachers in the network. Said Farrington, “The teachers see the network as an important professional development community, and they look forward to those meetings as a place where they get to talk about their practice in a way that feels respectful to them and lets them learn something. In this way, they also can begin to see their own teaching practice through new eyes.” One participating middle school teacher echoed those sentiments: “I’m surprised to find that many of the problems I face are true for other teachers too. This is the first time I’ve been in meetings with both middle school and high school teachers, and I am finding the high school perspective really helpful.”

At the outset, many teachers were surprised to learn that the leaders of 89TN didn’t have all the answers. There was no set of strategies or tools that would be handed out for teachers to use. However, as the project got underway, the idea that teachers can find the answers themselves rapidly gained traction.

In the spring of 2014, 89TN began working with groups of teachers on specific projects. To start, teachers who work in the same schools and with the same students chose a particular focus area. Some, for example, chose to foster a sense of belonging in new ninth graders as they transitioned into high school. They then did background reading on that particular focus area and agreed on using a common strategy or practice to address that area during the first four weeks of the 2014–15 school year. They agreed to collect data (e.g., attendance, tardiness, homework completion, and grades) from each of their classrooms. And as the school year progresses, they plan to come together, share their data, reflect on the impact of their efforts on their chosen focus area, and learn from each other whether there were strategies or tools that were particularly effective, or not, and why. The goal is for teachers to tweak their interventions and iterate in their classrooms for another period of time, honing their strategies and again reflecting on the results. As teachers feel comfortable that they have a specific strategy or practice to share with others, 89TN leaders



High school students work together to learn geometry concepts.

will support them to document their efforts and share their findings with others in the network. Once the network as a whole has identified a set of strategies and practices that appear to be working with students, 89TN will share these more broadly.

89TN is currently working on developing practical measurement tools that teachers can use to capture students' feedback on a particular lesson, and surveys to track changes in teacher practice or student behaviors and competencies over time.

One big challenge is figuring out how to help teachers blend their 89TN work with their required daily tasks. In some cases, for example, a principal or another administrator has set particular mandates (e.g., a certain number of minutes in the day allocated to reading or math), which make it difficult for teachers to integrate 89TN activities, such as setting aside time to build relationships or talk about homework strategies.

## What they are learning:

- **A supportive environment such as 89TN, in which teachers can feel safe expressing themselves and experimenting with new strategies and practice, can be a powerful motivator, compelling teachers to improve their abilities to help students become effective learners.** Teachers make an extra investment in their professional learning time to participate in 89TN, but they do so because they believe that the program will help them learn and grow as teachers.
- **89TN has found that starting small is the best approach.** Participating teachers do better when working on one focus area at a time, such as concentrating on learning how to help students develop one specific type of mindset. Teachers themselves are diverse learners and need a range of supports to engage and succeed in this work.
- **Working directly with teachers has been rewarding, but 89TN also sees the value in helping schools and school districts create a culture that supports the development of noncognitive abilities.** Teachers doing this on their own, juggling this work among their many priorities, can be challenging. It would help teachers to have a set of priorities from their school and district leaders that includes work to develop students' noncognitive abilities.

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*This profile is one of a series of profiles on organizations focused on developing effective learners.*

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