



## Research Brief

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# Instructional Reform Facilitator Knowledge Sharing in San Francisco Unified School District

This brief summarizes two phases of a research study on the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) Instructional Reform Facilitator (IRF) Network. In the early 2000s, SFUSD introduced IRFs as a strategy to improve professional capacity at schools facing persistent disparities in student opportunities and outcomes. By 2019, the network had expanded to 45 school-based teacher leaders who were tasked with improving student learning and promoting equity for underserved groups, such as African American students, multilingual learners, and students with Individual Education Plans. The IRFs set out to meet these needs by coaching teachers, facilitating professional development, leading data-informed conversations, and supporting teacher collaboration.

At their respective schools, IRFs introduced instructional strategies and adult learning practices. However, there was less understanding of how IRFs shared their learning across schools at their monthly network meetings. This question led to a Stanford-SFUSD partnership project conducted between 2019 and 2023. The research aimed to 1) understand knowledge sharing in the IRF Network in order to 2) identify the network routines that could optimize IRFs spreading best practices across SFUSD.

### ***Phase 1: Traditional Research-Practice Partnership***

The first phase of the study (AY 2019-2020 and 2020-2021) was designed to understand the ways IRFs shared their learning by connecting at network meetings. The data for this part of the study was collected through observations, surveys, and interviews. In addition to the long-term project goals, the research partnership also aimed to identify immediate opportunities for improvement in the network. This real-time data was especially important for making adjustments to network practice during the shift to online meetings due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **The major findings from the first phase of research include:**

- IRFs valued connections with peers working with similar populations of students (i.e., same cohort).
- While new IRFs shared individual resources (e.g., books, websites, spreadsheets), experienced IRFs dove into conversations about systems change at their schools and wanted to deepen their learning.
- IRFs used affinity groups to understand how their racial identities shaped their equity leadership.
- IRFs sought more goal alignment with their principals and district administrators.
- Though people of color working as IRFs shared the most advice in the network, they also experienced more resistance to their leadership from teachers and administrators.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Phase 2: Design-Based Implementation Research***

As the study progressed, the partnership team wanted to begin applying their findings by engaging the coaches themselves. The team convened a focus group of nine experienced IRFs, many who were women of color, to ensure that the recommendations emerging from the research aligned with their experiences. The focus group met for two meetings. This allowed the questions IRFs surfaced in the first meeting to guide further analysis and discussion in the second. The focus group illuminated insights and built camaraderie that the group decided to build on through design-based implementation research (DBIR).

The DBIR process focuses on addressing persistent problems of practice from multiple stakeholders' perspectives using iterative, collaborative design.<sup>2</sup> The aim of these inquiry cycles is to develop theory related to practice and research in service for sustained change in systems. The integration of continuous improvement into SFUSD coaching prepared the IRFs to dive into the design process at the design team's monthly meetings. Building on the Phase 1 findings, the coaches identified three priorities for increasing the IRF Network's effectiveness and impact.

1. Creating regular connections between IRFs so they can troubleshoot and share best practices
2. Sharing coaching resources accessibly
3. Communicating broadly so that IRFs are well-utilized by SFUSD school-site and district leaders

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<sup>1</sup> People of color is a category that includes American Indian/Alaskan Native, African American/Black, Asian, Hispanic/Latinx, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander IRFs.

<sup>2</sup> Penuel, W. R., Fishman, B. J., Haugan Cheng, B., & Sabelli, N. (2011). Organizing research and development at the intersection of learning, implementation, and design. *Educational Researcher*, 40(7), 331-337. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X11421826>

Due to the time and resource constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, the design team focused on deepening within-network relationships. They decided to do this by developing an IRF peer coaching program. The design team viewed peer coaching as a way to critically press each others' thinking and decrease coach isolation. More broadly, they viewed IRF peer coaching as a way to normalize coaching in SFUSD, even for experienced educators.

By the end of the 2021-2022 academic year, the design team had outlined the mission of the peer coaching program, identified a coaching model, created a survey to match coaching pairs, and matched pairs from the priorities outlined in the survey for a three-month peer coaching pilot. In the 2022-2023 academic year, the team used data from the pilot to modify the coaching program. These included offering a menu of ways to engage with one's peer coach, addressing absences at network meetings by combining two coaching pairs to form "pods," and offering time in network meetings to schedule future peer coaching check-ins. The design team took leadership of presenting the program to the network. Their ownership of peer coaching increased enthusiasm and offered the initiative legitimacy.

**The major findings from the second phase of the research include:**

- IRFs have unique insight into which programs can have the most impact.
- IRFs are more receptive to initiatives that are led by their peers.
- IRFs want programs to be realistic about their capacity and sensitive to their job demands.
- Experienced IRFs seek opportunities to continue their professional learning by
  - going beyond consuming information to considering their implications and
  - exploring ideas used beyond educational contexts (e.g., design thinking).

**Implications for San Francisco Unified School District**

- **Network professionals addressing similar problems.** IRFs valued small group connections with peers who shared an understanding of each others' school and community context.
- **Enrich the experiences of professionals from marginalized groups.** People of color IRFs had rich insights that were minimized at their schools, but were celebrated and channeled into leadership within the IRF Network.
- **Promote coherence between different levels of the school district.** IRFs desired clear communication with their school leaders and district leaders to unify their respective goals.
- **Differentiate professional learning opportunities.** Experienced IRFs' eager participation in the design team shows that educators want professional learning that builds on their existing expertise.
- **Offer opportunities for non-evaluative peer accountability.** Affinity groups and peer coaching were successful because they were led by IRFs, for IRFs.
- **Empower teachers to guide decision-making and strategic planning.** IRFs wanted their schools and the district to use their knowledge and experience for educational improvement. The educators closest to practice can identify opportunities and needs in ways more distant leaders cannot.