

Washington State Fellows: Lessons Learned and the Continuing Vision for a State-Level Instructional Leadership Network

2019–20 Evaluation Brief

Introduction

State education agencies (SEAs) across the United States are often challenged to implement key legislation around K-12 education effectively and efficiently with limited resources in a short timeframe. To assist in this effort, Washington State created and optimized a model that began as a modest pilot through a collaboration between the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and the Association of Educational Service Districts (AESD).

The **Washington State Fellows' Network (Fellows' Network)** is an exemplary model for building academic content, pedagogical strategies, and leadership skills for early learning, English language arts, mathematics, and science educators and administrators¹. The primary goal of the program is to build the capacity of its members to improve student academic and non-academic outcomes. Members in the Fellows' Network are called *Fellows* and primarily work as teachers across Washington. They meet four times each school year to engage in rich collaborative activities with colleagues in the same academic content area. Topics covered in the meetings include equity, change management, data analytics, and assessment. Entrance into the program is achieved through completion of an application and assurances. Assurances include a commitment on the part of the Fellow to work collaboratively with an administrator to create goals that demonstrate leadership of self and others. Conversely, assurances also acknowledge that the district will support the Fellow to participate in the Network.

This brief highlights how states can partner with their Educational Service Districts (ESDs) to create a similar professional learning model to implement state initiatives, build instructional leadership capacity, and positively influence student learning. To assist in the documentation of the journey from a bright vision in 2012 to sustainable reality in 2020, ten individuals participated in focus groups or interviews. These individuals played key roles at OSPI and the ESDs in the emerging phase of the work.

This brief documents successes and lessons learned through the Fellows' Network as a model for other SEAs and school organizations to consider for replication.

¹ Retrieved May 4, 2020, from <https://www.k12.wa.us/educator-support/educator-leadership/washington-state-fellows-network>

Process of Emergence

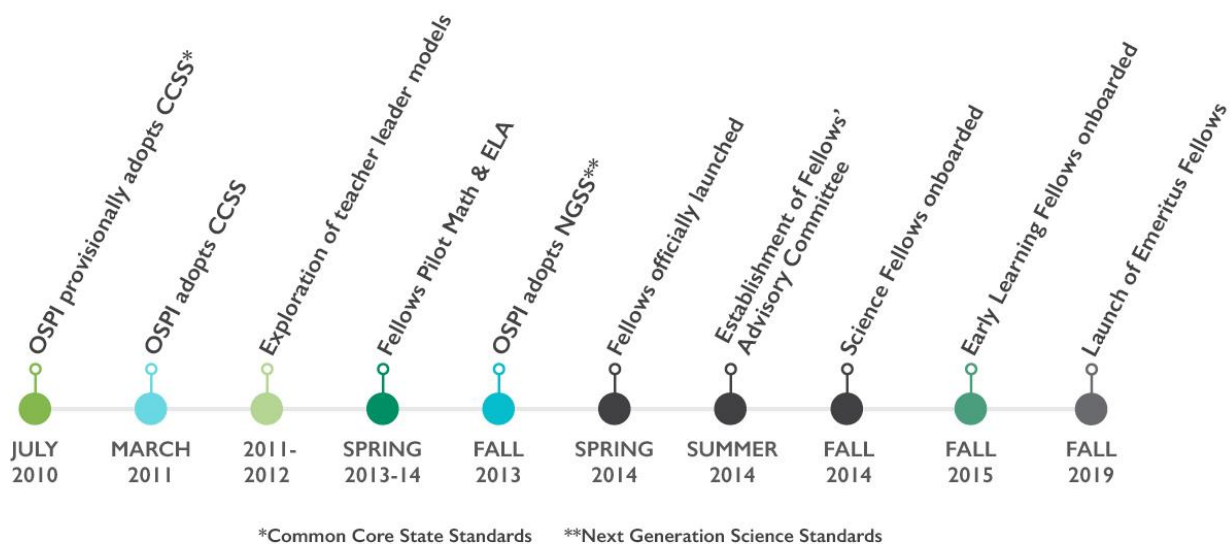
The Fellows' Network launched in 2012, helped to meet the needs of educators implementing the new learning standards. OSPI and the ESDs already enjoyed a strong collaborative relationship and sought to develop an effective and efficient model to build capacity of teacher leaders to assist with statewide initiatives. The immediate initiative focused on the rollout of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS). OSPI Content Leads and the ESD Content Specialists—now called Regional Coordinators (RCs)—had a shared vision of the importance of strong teacher leadership for a successful implementation of the new standards.

Additionally, they wanted to offer a venue for teachers and leaders to collaborate and improve their professional practice. Especially in rural areas, teacher professional development and resources to improve pedagogical and content knowledge were largely unavailable. The OSPI Content Leads and ESD RCs were aware of the importance of teacher collaboration to learn content and practice pedagogical strategies to deliver rigorous and relevant instruction to all students.

Rolling out the new standards and providing an ongoing venue for professional learning were the impetus behind seeking out potential models for professional development delivery. Towards this end, OSPI and several RCs worked together to review research and attend education conferences nationwide to seek out and learn about various delivery models. This review enabled early program designers to land on an approach that they felt would work and began to plan a pilot implementation of the model.

The timeline below traces the major milestones from 2010 to present (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Major events, 2010–present



Pilot Period of Mathematics and English Language Arts

In 2012, OSPI Content Champions and RCs mutually decided to name the model the Washington State Fellows' Network. The Fellows are unique to each of the four content areas: math, English language arts (ELA), science, and early learning. The initial pilot focused on the implementation of two content areas, math and ELA, followed by a phased sequential implementation for science and early learning Fellows.

In spring 2013, the first pilot occurred, and math and ELA Fellows assembled in one statewide convening. Before the convening, the OSPI Content Directors in math and ELA worked with the RCs to design the agenda and activities and assemble quality resources to support teachers as they implemented the Common Core standards. Both math and ELA Fellows attended the morning session for a collective message about the piloting of the new model and their shared work in implementing the Common Core. In the afternoon, math and ELA teachers broke out separately to focus on their specific content standards.

Proof of Concept-Decision to Roll out

The design team was pleased with the 2013-14 pilot and in 2014, the Fellows' Network officially launched. The State Superintendent and OSPI teaching and learning departments made a formal announcement in support of the work and remained enthusiastic and engaged, providing direction when needed.

Focus group participants from the ESDs reflected on the collaboration throughout the endeavor. A participant shared: "I think what has been robust throughout this and a catalyst for the success of the Network is that OSPI already had a relationship with the [ESD Regional] Coordinators in each content area." This allowed for a smooth pilot and launch and a smart integration of initiatives in progress, such as the Washington State Comprehensive Literacy Plan and the Northern Cascades and Olympics Science Partnership. From these existing initiatives came the first candidates and cohort of Fellows in ELA, math and science. Established partnerships, such as one with the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession, provided a jump start and quickly bolstered the teacher leadership component of the Fellows' Network.

While Fellows were building connections to other teachers, RCs were also strengthening connections as they aligned their work across the state. One RC interviewed pointed out, "I think each content area has its own culture and its own... approach to developing that sense of community and trust. Before the Fellows' Network, the RCs did not have many common initiatives that brought them together. The Fellows' Network served to build a collective identity for the RCs. As one math RC shared, "Fellows gave us a model for us to learn how to operate together and do shared work across the state, which was not something we were doing prior necessarily."

In 2013, OSPI officially adopted the NGSS and, in fall 2014, the first cohort of science Fellows assembled. A science RC recalled, "We were told through OSPI conversations and communication that science Fellows were coming. And then in one [science RC] meeting, I

remember we made plans how [the Fellows' Network] would work, what it would be made up of. We had a lot of conversations in terms of the different levels of leaders we were pulling from like classroom teachers. We viewed that as tier leadership, that it's important to help [the teacher] focus on their own practice but also to consider the leadership of others later on."

Washington's early learning leadership observed the rollout of ELA, math, and science Fellows with great interest, and they reflected on the effectiveness of the Fellows program. Early learning leaders explained that this area is unique for several reasons. First, a private investment made by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) awarded to Puget Sound ESD, formalized a group of early learning leaders who had been collaborating for about a decade. The BMGF funded these leaders (ESD early learning RCs) to focus on early mathematics, racial equity, and family engagement. To accomplish this task, three smaller groups were created, and each group produced resources to share with each other.

Early learning is also unique because the work requires coordination with federal and state partners across diverse learning settings, such as K-12, Head Start, and private childcare centers. An interviewee shared, "Each ESD has really close partnerships and collaborative relationships in our community. We had an opportunity to think creatively about what it would look like to build a capacity model for early learning teachers across the state." An intentional decision was made to use the existing model with some adjustments to accommodate program partners across a variety of early learning contexts. This option presented an easy leap to adapt the model for early learning, including a change in the application, outreach component, and recruitment process. The need to improve success in math for early learners became the impetus to add Early Learning Fellows and in fall 2015, Early Learning Fellows came onboard. By 2015, math, ELA, science, and early learning Fellows were up and running. In the next phase of work OSPI, the ESDs, and the Fellows relentlessly worked to optimize the model.

The Optimization of the Fellows' Network

The launch of the pilot also marked the beginning of the cycle of inquiry and continuous improvement as stakeholders regularly came together to discuss the Fellows' Network. These dedicated individuals shared their expertise and established the components needed to fully implement the Fellows' Network. They quickly discovered that a central component of the program was missing. One RC interviewed reflected, "As the content folks, we were good at delivering the content, but we weren't so good at communicating the larger picture and the vision of the work to a broader audience." Focus group members reflected that the program needed the support of the ESD Assistant Superintendents to send a clear and consistent message across the state about the Fellows' Network. Key players assembled to move the work forward through launching a committee in summer 2014. "The Fellows' Advisory Committee [FAC] was a brilliant idea," shared an interviewee, "because the committee included key players in all decision-making, feedback, and strategic planning." An RC shared, "Having our voice at the table helped ensure that the model could be implemented with fidelity, but also differentiated when needed." However, the establishment of the FAC proved to be challenging and "the bumpiest part" of the initial work. An interviewee shared, "Initially, Assistant Superintendents did not fully understand both the intent and the content of the Network... Since they were

going to be a part of the Network, it was essential that they were able to dialogue and be committed to it.”

The FAC began to convene four times per year to allow time to actively develop a shared and unified understanding of the work. Informed by the literature and research in the area of interpersonal communication, the FAC modeled best practices in small group decision making. “We were very thoughtful about what the structure would look like. The FAC comes together, makes decisions and the members bring it back to their regions,” said an interviewee. Taking ownership was and continues to be manifested through the FAC feedback loops between OSPI, the ESDs, and the districts served by the RCs. As one focus group participant explained, “The feedback loop is so important because feedback has to be listened to and acted upon. We had to show evidence that we were acting on that work and it requires all of us to do that. We had to have voices from the region in the Advisory Group, too, not just OSPI.”

The Fellows' Network created a strategic connection from OSPI to the ESDs and down to the district level. “One of the things early on that we were very intentional about and is foundational now is the intentionality of planning your work with your district administrator or principal,” said a focus group participant. Interviewees acknowledged that this connection with administration is important to maximize the utility and benefit of Fellows to their districts.

Historically, each ESD RC focused almost exclusively on their own regional initiatives, and opportunities to work with other RCs were limited. The Fellows' Network provided an authentic way for RCs to build an identity as a group, co-construct goals, and align their efforts in each content area. “[The Fellows' Network provided a way] for RCs to progress as a group and collaborate together. It was the Fellows model [that drove] us to learn how to operate together with shared work, which was not something that we were doing prior,” said an interviewee.

Perfectly positioned between the OSPI content leads and the districts, the RCs have formed a trusted partnership with Fellows that has provided a gateway for building teacher leadership capacity. RCs already had expertise in adult learning and were working to meet the needs of the teachers and school districts in their ESD region. They were accustomed to developing the curriculum and content agenda for teacher professional development; however, they did not have many opportunities to work closely with one another. The Fellows' Network was the impetus for RCs across Washington State to operate as a collaborative that prioritizes goals and develops the curriculum and content for the four Fellows' convenings each year.

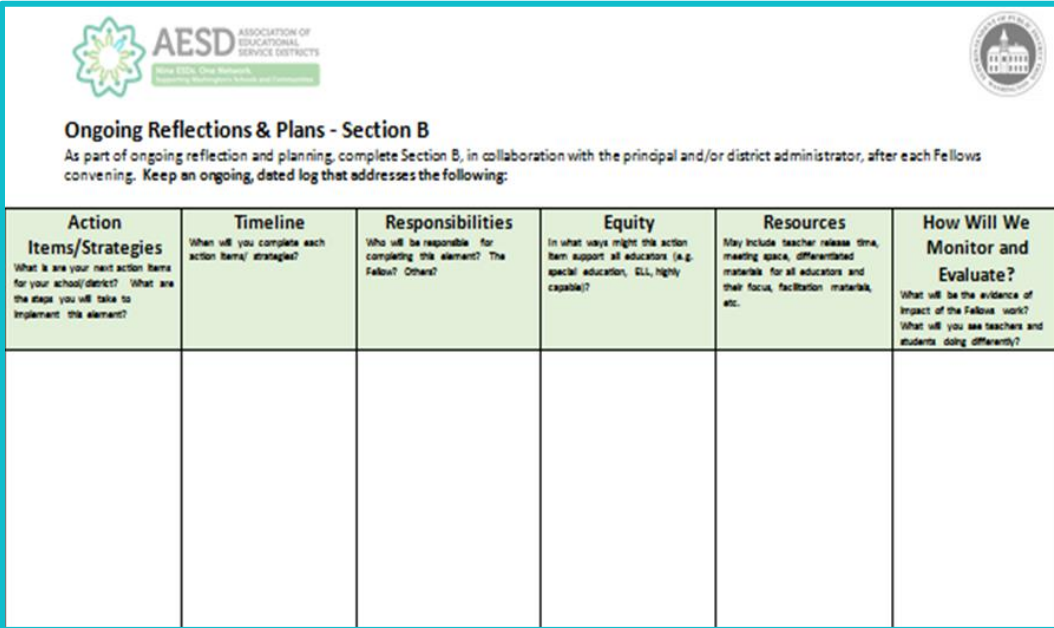
Data Collection and Evaluation Matures

Most focus group participants emphasized that the program exists to encourage and support improved teacher practice. As one participant shared, “[The Fellows' Network] is not about cerebral stimulation. This is about trying to change practice ... and changing practice is much more difficult.” To promote change in practice, program leadership conceived of a shared tool, called an action plan, for documenting and reflecting Fellows' activities. An interviewee shared her recollection of how the Fellows' Action Plan evolved:

"The Action Plan was one of the core ideas right away, probably in 2012. And I'm sure it was pretty clunky at the beginning, but it kept getting refined throughout ... We had to be intentional about the Action Plan more than just mentioning it at the beginning. We learned that we had to attend to the Action Plan and look at it at the end and say, 'What did you get done?' "

The Fellows' Action Plans allow them to evaluate their progress; reflect on their accomplishments; determine how to overcome challenges; and document outcomes on personal, district, or system-level goals. The Action Plans also provide a way for the Fellow to anchor his or her work in the district's initiatives and keep their administrator in the loop as they improve pedagogical strategies and student outcomes. The Plan follows best practices in personal goal setting by setting specific and time-bound goals, designating responsibilities, identifying resources needed, and determining how to measure progress. Foundational to the Fellow's work is taking time to critically reflect on ways to provide equitable access to learning for all students and to lead with equity in the school. The Action Plan template (Figure 2) references OSPI's equity statement and includes an area for reflection on aspects of equity.

Figure 2. An action plan template



The form is titled "Ongoing Reflections & Plans - Section B" and includes instructions: "As part of ongoing reflection and planning, complete Section B, in collaboration with the principal and/or district administrator, after each Fellows convening. Keep an ongoing, dated log that addresses the following:". It features a table with six columns: Action Items/Strategies, Timeline, Responsibilities, Equity, Resources, and How Will We Monitor and Evaluate? Each column has a brief description of what to enter. The table has one empty row for data entry.

Action Items/Strategies <small>What is your next action item for your school/district? What are the steps you will take to implement this element?</small>	Timeline <small>When will you complete each action item/ strategy?</small>	Responsibilities <small>Who will be responsible for completing this element? The Fellow? Others?</small>	Equity <small>In what ways might this action item support all educators (e.g. special education, EL, highly capable)?</small>	Resources <small>May include teacher release time, meeting space, differentiated materials for all educators and their focus, facilitation materials, etc.</small>	How Will We Monitor and Evaluate? <small>What will be the evidence of impact of the Fellow's work? What will you see teachers and students doing differently?</small>

As RCs provided high-quality professional development for content, pedagogical skills, and leadership, they also collected data from their Fellows to gauge their satisfaction and effectiveness. An interviewee explained how program evaluation data evolved and matured from simple workshop logistics to a stronger focus on personal learning goals and application of knowledge learned. "The Fellows initially provided feedback on what was working and what was not working [and] this later evolved to [a systematic] data collection [and] we got better about using data."

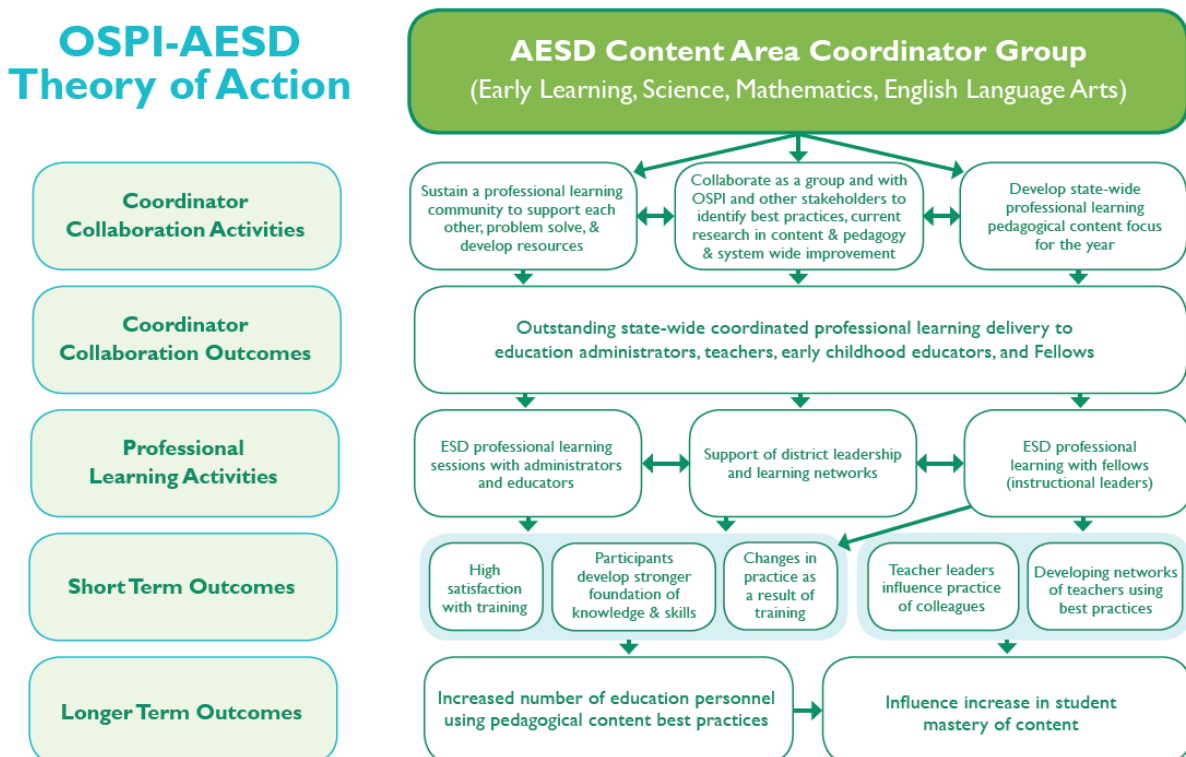
Evidence of Effectiveness

In 2016, OSPI and all nine ESDs (under the AESD umbrella) launched an ambitious goal to develop a comprehensive evaluation plan to test assumptions, monitor implementation, and assess outcomes of the Fellows' Network. First, a theory of action and logic model applicable to all four content areas needed to be developed. Released in 2017, the Theory of Action was co-created by engaging all RCs across the state (Figure 3).

Since the first external comprehensive evaluation in 2016, quantitative and qualitative data confirm that participation in the Fellows' Network leads to improved practice for Fellows (administrators and teachers) and improved student outcomes. For example, over consecutive years, 90% of Fellows either strongly agreed or agreed that the Network helped them achieve the short- and long-term outcomes illustrated in the Theory of Action and Logic Model. Fellows consistently report that the Network has:

- Expanded their ability to lead colleagues through change;
- Broadened and deepened their pedagogical and content knowledge;
- Improved their ability to promote social and emotional learning; and
- Gained a new awareness of ways to create equitable learning opportunities for students.

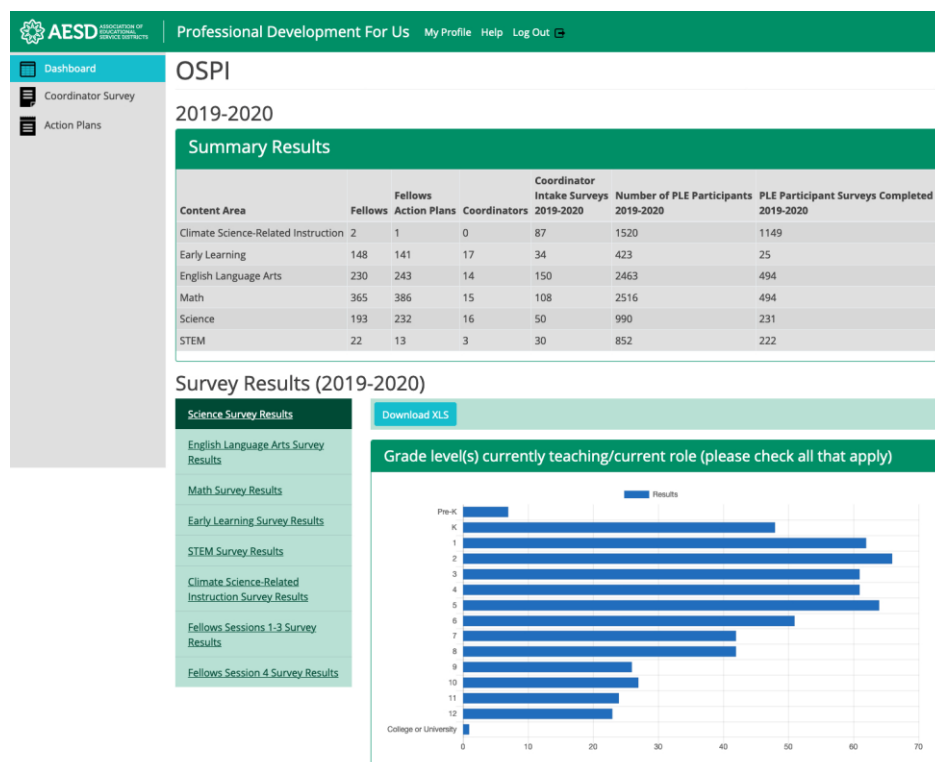
Figure 3. Theory of Action for Washington Fellows' Network



National teaching associations have recognized the leadership qualities, communication abilities, and expert content knowledge of teachers/district coaches who have completed the program. The associations have embraced the Fellows and realize that they are poised to take leadership positions within state chapters and direct efforts that provide high-quality, professional learning experiences for their colleagues.²

In 2018, the online data collection platform PDfor.us was developed to provide real-time evaluation data collected from Fellows (Figure 4). OSPI and the RCs designed the platform with robust data collection instruments that provide both formative and summative data to improve the Fellows' experience and student outcomes. Based on the Theory of Action, the Fellows' Network's activities are designed specifically with outcomes in mind, including deepening content knowledge, improving practice, developing learning networks, building leadership competencies, and increasing student achievement. PDfor.us proved essential to supporting these outcomes, as the RCs and ESD leadership rely heavily on the data to make timely, informed decisions and mid-course corrections to meet Fellows' needs.

Figure 4. Online data collection platform PDfor.us

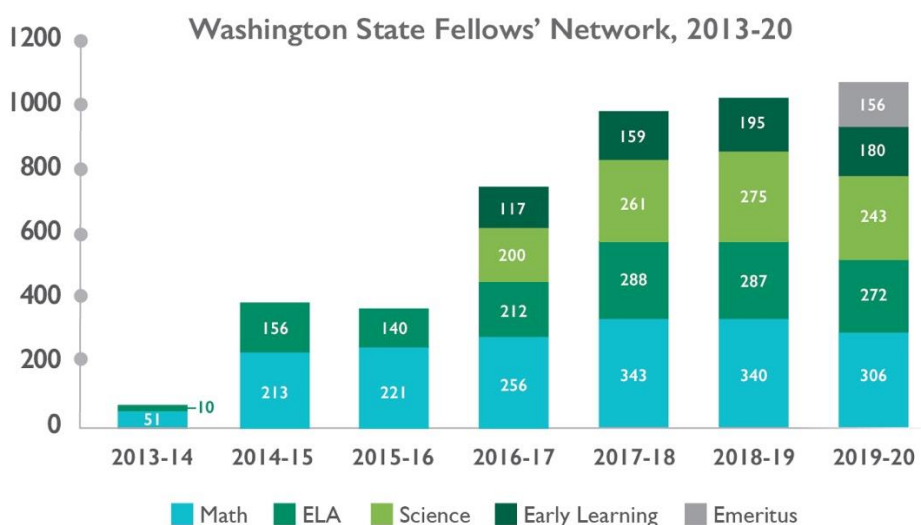


² OSPI/AESD Professional Development Learning Network Evaluation. Retrieved on May 6, 2020 from <https://www.waese.org/aesd-professional-learning-network/evaluation/>

Sustainability and Future Aspirations

The results of this effort have been far-reaching, exceeding expectations of those who originally conceived of the model. Membership in the Fellows' Network has steadily increased each year and, in 2019, a total of 1,157 Fellows participated (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Membership by Content Area in Fellows' Network



The Fellows' Network has prompted conversations about how the model might be utilized for other professional learning communities. State leaders interviewed shared that from their observations, a very specific set of pre-requisite conditions are needed to support Fellows. Among these pre-requisite criteria are a well-established communication infrastructure between key content statewide leads, clear roles and responsibilities within the group, decentralized leaders within the schools, and a history of productive relationships with state and/or national partners.

Realizing that the current work needs to be sustained, the FAC decided to provide a venue for Fellows who completed the 3-year program. In 2019, the Emeritus Fellows concept was launched so Fellows can choose to continue to attend the convenings upon program completion. Emeritus Fellows take on critical roles as mentors in the convenings and instructional leaders in their schools, communities, and professional organizations. Fellows shared that they look forward to collaborating with the Emeritus Fellows to build stronger education for all students. An interviewee reflected:

“There is a sustainability model built in because the Emeritus Fellows are now going to be called upon to help with the training or help with doing WSTA [the Washington Science Teachers Association conference] ... and just being called on to continue using their leadership skills in other capacities. What a great way to show sustainability in a program.”

The professional associations have also embraced the Fellows and realize that they are poised to take leadership positions within state chapters and direct efforts that provide high-quality professional learning experiences for their colleagues.

Finally, the members of the FAC expressed their deep gratitude for the school districts' commitment to participate in the Fellows' Network. An interviewee shared, "They have endured the costs for substitute teachers and transportation [and] contributed their resources to make the Fellows' Network successful. They have to step up to the plate every year, and that's pretty remarkable." Now and into the future, OSPI and the ESDs are committed to providing strong support and dedicating their expertise to ensure the continued success of the Fellows and the Fellows' Network's positive influence on educators and students throughout Washington State.