



Aporia Consulting Ltd.

**North East Region MISA PNC Review:  
Developing Research and Evaluation in the PNC**

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This report was developed in response to a call for support in fostering research in the North East Region MISA PNC. The report is based on four key items:

1. Participation in an organizational North East Region MISA PNC meeting on April 21, 2006.
2. Nine MISA Year 1 Ministry of Education Board Reports from boards in the network<sup>1</sup>.
3. The North East Region MISA PNC Year 1 Ministry of Education Report.
4. The North East Region MISA PNC Year 2 Ministry of Education Plan.

There are four sections in this report that address key elements to support the development of research as a core component that is embedded in the work of the MISA PNC. The impressions and comments section offers some insight from my perspective given my research and evaluation experience. The preliminary needs assessment section identifies some research gaps in the MISA approaches. This section also contains a framework for a survey of the network group. The suggestions section lists the possibilities for the network group to improve the integration of research and evaluation into the work of the group.

### ***Impressions and Comments***

In reading through the documents reporting on the MISA board and PNC activities that occurred over the last year, my perception was informed by two key events. First, I understood the content of the documents given the concerns, celebrations, and desired outcomes articulated at the April PNC planning meeting. Second, my thinking was framed by the recent evaluation Aporia completed of effective networks of schools in British Columbia and England.

- The Year 1 focus was to adopt a common technology that would facilitate the storage and access of data. This goal received most of the attention because it was believed to be a necessary starting point for educators at all levels. If evidence was to become an integrated part of the work of educators, then a system for accessible data was a necessary preliminary requirement.

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<sup>1</sup> Nine reports were submitted

- The focus on technology has been fruitful and there is an increasing confidence that there will be ample data available for use in supporting system decision-making.
- Training has been primarily focused on data collection, storage, inventory, consistency, cleansing, trend analysis, and reporting. The approaches to training have been data-centric, which has bred some feelings of being overwhelmed by data without the skills and knowledge to convert the data into information.
- The network has successfully worked to build relationships amongst the members. It was sometimes a difficult process to start sharing and the leadership group believes it is now in a position where there exists relational trust and collaboration.
- The network has been working towards supporting a culture-shift towards evidence-informed decision making within the member boards. There has been little explicit attention paid to how the network developed and is developing as an entity that can foster greater school improvement.
- There is limited attention to research and evaluation, but there is a general appreciation for its importance in school improvement.

### ***Preliminary Assessment***

This section focuses on the two key issues discussed at the planning meeting and in the post-planning discussion with Bill O’Hallarn. First, I address that network-specific and research gaps within the PNC. Second, I address the potential construction of the survey referenced in the MISA PNC planning report.

### **Purposeful network awareness and development**

The accomplishments through network activities were highlighted in the reports and there was minimal reporting on the development of the network as a new entity. Aporia’s investigation of network learning communities identified seven key features (*Purpose and Focus, Leadership, Relationships, Collaboration, Inquiry, Accountability, and Building capacity and support*) that support learning through the network. The “Questions to Consider” document (attached) provides insight into each key feature. This section offers a reflection of the network development given the reports and discussions from the leadership meeting.

In the PNC report, there were comments on the difficulties of starting the conversations around certain elements. But there was no evidence that explicit consideration was given to building relational trust amongst the team. Although it was not explicit, it appears that the team did develop trusting *relationships* from a relatively fresh start when the members of the leadership team did not know one another. For example, there was a hurdle in having boards share their experience and talk openly about their core capacities. It is important to recognize that developing relationships require opportunity and time, and that the PNC leadership team appears to have attained a degree of relational trust that has permitted important work around the technology, significant discussions about capacity gaps and collaborative next steps. This is a positive first step in supporting network learning and should be explicitly noted.

The *collaborative work* that was conducted through the network was primarily focused on the acquisition of common software for data storage and access. The network activities around the technology were constructed so that the individuals helped one another, shared their knowledge and decision-making rationale, and needed each other's contribution in order to succeed in their own acquisition of the software. In this endeavour, the individuals developed a confidence in the competence and commitment of the others in the group. This kind of joint work is an example of the kind of collaboration that promotes strong network learning.

Although there was a good example with a component of technology, the collaboration with respect to data management and supporting the human capacity for using data to inform programmatic decisions appeared to be limited to shared training sessions with a primary focus on MISA and educational leaders. There were no identifiable network activities that created the opportunities for the *rigorous joint work* that would require network members to engage in *collaborative inquiry*. This is the high-leverage work through which network learning occurs. The technology component appeared to have captured most of the attention of the network leadership, but there is strong indication that the use of the data is an important commitment for Year 2. As the data storage and access interface issues are being resolved, attention is being turned towards how to use the data effectively for school improvement that will enhanced student achievement.

The approaches for *building capacity and support* in the network appear to rely heavily on training sessions where external experts are brought in to present, workshop, and illustrate how to engage with data for evidence-informed decisions. There is no evidence

that opportunities are being created through network activities for members to intentionally examine their own beliefs and challenge what they do against some new knowledge, new skills, and new dispositions. When the objective is to improve student learning and achievement, educators need to engage in learning that changes their thinking and practices in the classroom. Opportunities to learn that result in sustainable changes are constructed with in-school components that foster active learning that address real-time needs. Moreover, this approach addresses the issue raised at the PNC leadership-planning meeting around educators and educational leaders consistently being called out of school for training opportunities.

Finally, the revision of the PNC mission statement at the leadership-planning meeting narrowed the focus of the network. A fundamental and clear organizational purpose is critical to the success of networked learning communities. The focus will have a greater impact if it is based on evidence that it makes a difference to student learning and achievement. The focus should be shared and create opportunities for joint attention to issues that would benefit from the combined collaborative efforts of the network.

## **Research in the System**

The MISA Year 1 Board reports did not comment on research directly. Research was addressed in the PNC-related documents and at the planning meeting.

There was no evidence that there exists a complete picture of the research that is currently occurring in the boards. It is probable that there is research being conducted in the boards, but there is minimal monitoring of these activities. This raises two key issues. First, that there could be possibilities where research is being duplicated or where collaboration would promote benefits for more boards. Second, educators and educational leaders in the system are not benefiting from the data collected and information generated from research being conducted in the boards.

There was no evidence of a *purposeful program of research*, but the PNC members articulated a desire to include research in the work. The technology to store and access the data and the data management components were at the forefront of the PNC work in Year 1. Now that there is some consistency to the data-related components, attention is being given to the appropriate use of the data. One piece of that use is being couched in research. The research element of the PNC should provide the framework to think and

use the data in a manner that will provide relevant information for educational leaders to improve the system, and educators to improve their practice.

In order to develop the infrastructure to conduct research in the boards, it is important to first identify *what it is that the boards want to know*. Research can take on many forms and answer a variety of questions. It is important to first establish the priority areas that call for an investment of resources for research or evaluation. In addition, a complimentary strategy is to identify the data that is available (this is a task of the research subcommittee in the PNC Year 2 plan) and determine what kinds of research questions can already be answered given the current data in the database.

## **Survey**

At the PNC planning meeting, the group decided that a survey of needs developed from the results of this document would be appropriate. There are a number of possibilities on how to focus the survey:

1. If the survey addresses the issue of research and evaluation in the PNC, then questions about:
  - a. The priority areas and questions of the key stakeholders would facilitate developing a common program of research that reflects the needs of the membership.
  - b. The current research and evaluation occurring in the boards would facilitate an alignment of interests and to systematically capture the information generated from the studies.
2. If the survey addresses the issue of the network, then questions about:
  - a. The seven key features could offer some indication of the effect of the network in promoting changes in thinking and practice in schools.
  - b. Some of the key features could offer targeted information on high leverage items where the PNC has already invested effort.

## ***Suggestions***

This section offers suggestions on potential next steps in the process of developing the PNC given the comments in the previous sections.

1. Attend to network development using the findings in the Aporia investigation as a framework. There are already successes in the PNC that should be celebrated and promoted. Other high-leverage network development activities should be purposefully promoted.
2. Make the network of boards an explicit entity keeping in mind that the work needs to support classroom-level changes that positively affect student learning and achievement.
3. While continuing attention to the technology and data management components, there needs to be an integration of the human resource development so that the training and learning opportunities created for the technology component becomes embedded within a purposeful framework that asks questions before looking at data. This kind of integrated approach should be designed specifically to minimize the growing anxiety around being overwhelmed by the data so that educational leaders (and educators) can approach the databases with confidence.
4. Develop university partnerships with a dual-purpose intent. First, the partnership should address research and evaluation in-service and pre-service learning programs. The university should become an authentic member of the PNC and contribute appropriately as a pre-service and graduate institution. Second, the university should co-lead or lead some of the research and/or evaluation activities. The PNC needs to protect its own interests through explicit guidelines on intellectual property, data collection protocol, data storage, data sharing, interpretation, and timely dissemination and sharing of results and findings.
5. Develop a common protocol for researcher and evaluator access that protects the interests of the boards without discouraging or inhibiting researchers to approach the board or compromising the integrity of the research.
6. Develop a common language with respect to data, research, and evaluation needs to be developed and made explicit.
7. Develop a shared codebook of the clean data that is in board databases. This should also include all the data that is available through ONSIS.

8. Collaboratively develop a program of research that focuses on priority areas. The PNC boards should engage in joint-work that identifies what it is they want to know based on criteria for improvement.
9. Select two priority projects from the PNC program of research and develop network activities to conduct the research with a participatory protocol that builds research capacity in the network as part of the process. The same participatory philosophy should govern how the results are interpreted, shared, and used.
10. Develop an 8-month modular active-learning program to build educator capacity for evidence-informed decision-making in the PNC. A select group of participants in each board should be nominated by the MISA leaders to participate as the first cohort in the program. The program will be a combination of off-site, online, and in-school modules that are all attached to developing basic applied research and evaluation skills and knowledge. The purpose of this program will be to create a core group of people across the PNC who have the capacity to understand how data can be collected and used to inform practical decisions.