



# Math in the Middle

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## Math in the Middle collaborates with Northwestern University to study teacher leadership

**B**uilding professional community in a school is critical for the improvement of teaching and learning. Important elements of a professional community include the degree to which there is:

- focus on student learning,
- shared norms and values,
- dialogue among colleagues,
- collaboration around the improvement of teaching practice.

Researchers from the Math in the Middle Institute Partnership at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, in conjunction with researchers from the Distributed Leadership for Middle School Mathematics Education project at Northwestern University in Chicago, have developed a survey to study instructional leadership in school communities. The results of the leadership study will lead to a better understanding of the patterns of leadership within and across school communities in support of instructional improvement.

One of the challenges facing researchers at UNL and Northwestern concerns the question of what size of school or district is necessary to obtain good information from the survey. First developed for use in the Chicago Public Schools, all Lincoln Public School middle level teachers will be asked to complete the online survey between February 19 and March 9. The survey will be administered to a sample of teachers at rural schools and districts later this spring.

Responses to the survey questions will allow researchers to describe the “social networks” in each school that participates in the survey and the varied resources teachers use to support their instruction.

Researchers believe that the school-level data reports will provide helpful information for understanding the professional learning communities and characterizing school environments. The reports will answer some of the following questions:

- How often do teachers seek advice from colleagues at the same school?
- To what degree do teachers rely more on contacts from other schools or outside resources?
- Is the professional learning community centered around a few influential individuals, or is influence distributed equally among all faculty?
- To what degree does the advice teachers receive influence a teacher’s practice?

The survey also collects data on patterns of resource use by teachers, such as how frequently they consult curricular materials, review district academic standards or participate in various kinds of professional development. Schools will receive a report that allows administrators to determine which resources are most useful to teachers and which might be underutilized.

Participating districts will receive general data about the social networks within and across schools, as well as a list of activities and resources teachers use to support instruction, with names of individual schools and teachers removed.

For more information on the survey and study, please contact Ruth Heaton at [rheaton1@unl.edu](mailto:rheaton1@unl.edu) or Jim Lewis at [jlewis@math.unl.edu](mailto:jlewis@math.unl.edu).

Funded by the National Science Foundation, the goal of the Distributed Leadership for Middle School Mathematics Education project is to make day-to-day practice of school leadership for instruction more transparent by examining how school leaders - administrators, specialists and teacher leaders - work to manage and improve instruction.

### Distributed leadership resource:

*Distributed Leadership*, 2006, Jossey Bass Publisher.  
Written by James Spillane (principal investigator of the Distributed Leadership for Middle School Mathematics Education project at Northwestern University).



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