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**The Effective Practice
Incentive Community (EPIC)**

An Evaluation
of EPIC's Analysis
# of School Practice
& Knowledge System

MetLife Foundation

New Leaders for New Schools | EPIC
THE EFFECTIVE PRACTICE
INCENTIVE COMMUNITY

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Executive Summary

Established in 2006 by New Leaders for New Schools™, the Effective Practice Incentive Community (EPIC) initiative rewards high-need urban schools showing significant gains in student achievement. In exchange, schools agree to share the practices helping to drive those gains, which they do through an in-depth study of practice, aided by the EPIC team and a suite of investigation tools. This investigation and analysis process culminates in the publication of a case study or practice profile on the EPIC Knowledge System, an online professional development platform.

To document the EPIC approach, and the design, content, and early use of the Knowledge System, New Leaders for New Schools contracted with Rockman et al, an independent research and evaluation firm with offices in San Francisco, CA, and Bloomington, IN. This brief is based on three evaluation activities Rockman conducted in May 2009: telephone interviews with EPIC staff, New Leaders coaches, and principals in award-winning schools to gather background information and feedback on the EPIC investigation process and initial use of the Knowledge System; a review of the EPIC tools used by schools to analyze practice and create cases and profiles; and a content analysis of the Knowledge System.

Findings from preliminary research designed to explore EPIC's impact and potential indicate that both the EPIC investigation and Knowledge System effectively build capacity for urban school improvement. The EPIC experience gives award-winning schools a model with which to continue to analyze and document practices linked to student achievement gains. Principals have used the EPIC tools for staff development and management training and modified their own classroom observations and teacher evaluations based on interactions with the EPIC team. In markedly similar ways, principals describe how EPIC has helped them take the time to reflect on practices and yet move forward faster because of efficiencies stemming from careful, systematic reflection and documentation of practice. Many also find that the experience and recognition gained through a national program has validated their efforts, garnered school-wide support for initiatives, raised their visibility in the community and supported ongoing school improvement efforts.

The EPIC Knowledge System encourages careful reflection through a series of questions that allow users to connect cases or profiles to their own work, while also accelerating change by providing detailed examples of practices that are contributing to student achievement gains. EPIC case studies and practice profiles include concrete explanations of practices, artifacts, video, and data on achievement gains, all situated in the context of the school, which help users adapt or replicate practices. New Leaders coaches look forward to incorporating the Knowledge System into their training because it reduces the need to reteach; gives them and trainees a common language, free of jargon; and accommodates principals' schedules as well as their own need for customizable resources that fit multiple training scenarios.

THE EFFECTIVE PRACTICE INCENTIVE COMMUNITY

The EPIC Investigation and Analysis Approach and Knowledge System

Overview

New Leaders for New Schools launched the Effective Practice Incentive Community (EPIC) initiative in 2006 as a way to identify, reward, analyze, and share school practices driving student achievement gains in high-poverty urban schools. Since then, EPIC has awarded more than $7.4 million dollars to district and charter schools around the country: 62 in the 2007-2008 school year (Cohort 1), and 60 in 2008-2009 (Cohort 2). Funding for the EPIC program comes from a five-year U.S. Department of Education Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant, school district and charter school partners, and private philanthropic funders.

In exchange for their financial awards, school leaders agree to share the practices they believe led to achievement gains in their schools. They do so through a rigorous process of identifying, analyzing, and documenting those effective practices. The process results in the production of a case study or practice profile to be included in the EPIC Knowledge System, an online, professional development system. The case studies and practice profiles offer real-life examples, specific strategies, and everyday tools for other educators to use in their own efforts to improve student achievement. At this time, the Knowledge System features more than 60 effective practices from Cohort 1 schools. Additional cases and profiles from Cohort 2 will soon bring the total to over 120. These resources are available to any educator in the New Leaders community and EPIC partner districts and charter schools, and in time will be made accessible, for free, to the broader educational community.

The power of the Effective Practice Incentive Community lies in the opportunity for educators to learn from one another. What sets the EPIC program apart from other initiatives and online professional development resources is its focus not on "blue-ribbon schools," "master teachers," or "best practices," but on effective practices of leaders in high-poverty, urban schools. Thus EPIC fills a gap for urban educators who "want to see practices making a real, measurable difference with kids who are like my kids, in schools that look like my school."

Methodology

For our interviews with coaches and principals, New Leaders selected a purposive sample based on geographic representation and range of EPIC experience. The six principals represented both cohorts and each of New Leaders' TIF grant partners—the District of Columbia Public Schools, Memphis City Schools, Denver Public Schools, and a national consortium of charter schools from around the country. The five coaches, who work with principals-in-training as well as practicing principals, represented several of the urban areas served by New Leaders—New York City; Washington, DC; Baltimore and Prince George's County; Milwaukee; and the San Francisco Bay area. Structured protocols, developed in collaboration with New Leaders, framed the interviews.

The documents under review included the suite of tools that guides schools through their investigation and documentation of effective practices. Those tools underwent significant revisions from the first cohort to the second, and our review included a comparison of the two sets, focusing on their clarity, ease of use, and effectiveness in structuring the steps of the analysis and documentation. We also looked at the ways in which the evolution of the tools refined the EPIC process itself.

Our review of the EPIC Knowledge System was guided by principals' and coaches' observations about the design and value of the resources, and by general precepts of instructional design and adult learning theory. At the time of our review, the Knowledge System included 11 case studies and 48 practice profiles, all from Cohort 1. From these, we sampled about one in four for a more in-depth content review, drawing on each of the three Urban Excellence Framework™ ("UEF") domains into which the cases and profiles are organized: Learning and Teaching, Leadership, and School Culture.

Our review rubric examined the:

- **adequacy and relevance of the documentation** and analysis, or the ways the contextual data, evidence, and artifacts aid end users

- **transferability**, or the balance between factors that situate the practice in a particular school and those that make it more widely applicable

- **"turnkey" factor**, or the extent to which the case or profile is "ready-to-use" for both self-study and facilitated professional development

- **clarity and accessibility** of the content and presentation

Where possible we triangulated our reviews and interviews with principals and coaches to understand how the process, products, and professional development were interrelated. Where appropriate, we also put findings in the words of respondents. That is not to say the small sample speaks for the entire EPIC community. Their shared experiences do, however, provide a starting point for understanding the impact of the EPIC model and resources on urban school change. Suggestions for further research, within and beyond the EPIC community, appear in the final section of this brief.

The EPIC Investigation and Analysis Approach

O nce EPIC identifies those schools posting student achievement gains and the principal and teachers agree to share practices that contributed to these gains, schools engage in a rigorous investigation and analysis of practice that culminates in a case study or profile to be published on the EPIC Knowledge System. This section documents the investigation model and what participating principals see as its impact on their leadership and on the wider school community.

Composition of School Teams

Although EPIC focuses on leadership and the principal's role in leading practices that drive higher achievement, principals are asked to assemble a school team for the EPIC investigation. The range—even among the six schools contacted for this brief—suggests that principals compose their EPIC investigation teams in a variety of ways. In one school, the principal tapped an existing school improvement team for the investigation and that team played a very formal role. In others, faculty members directly involved in an effective practice—for example, language arts teachers involved in collaborative scoring or teachers involved in benchmark assessments—made up the school team. A principal in both Cohorts 1 and 2 created an EPIC advisory committee during the first year that continued in the second.

The EPIC Model

The investigation process has two phases, the first of which is a rigorous, analytical investigation to identify practices that led to student achievement gains. EPIC asks schools to analyze the genesis and evolution of practices by considering actions in four phases: Analyze and Plan, Implement, Reflect, and Adapt and Improve. These steps become the organizing structure for every profile and case on the Knowledge System.

In selecting effective practices, school teams need not restrict the possibilities to instruction. Using the New Leaders' Urban Excellence Framework (UEF) as a guide, schools sort their practices into three domains: Learning and Teaching, School Culture, and Leadership. Again, these categories help orient not only school teams authoring cases and pro-

files but also other educators accessing them on the Knowledge System.

In consultation with the EPIC team, school teams narrow their focus to a single practice to be shared and embark on the second phase, the documentation of practice. In this phase, the school's leadership team assembles artifacts and evidence (again in consultation with the EPIC team and case writers) which will become part of their online story.

Tools and Protocols, Cohort 1

To tell "the real story," or the "how" and "why" behind an effective practice, EPIC provides a suite of tools created by New Leaders in collaboration with SchoolWorks, a Boston-based education consulting firm. In the Cohort 1 pilot of those tools, principals received a single, fairly lengthy document that led them through the multistep process; for Cohort 2, separate protocols (described in the following section) accompanied each step.

- **Cohort 1 Principal Self-Study.** The Cohort 1 Self-Study took the form of a first-person narrative that principals composed in response to a comprehensive list of questions about their leadership qualities and practices, or how they "led their school in implementing a particular instructional or cultural practice." Principals identified practices in the UEF domains and described key evidence, context, and actions for each. Then, via a conference call with an EPIC team member, principals were prompted to describe further dimensions of their practice—how they diagnosed a challenge, what sacrifices they made, what benchmarks they used to measure progress.

  Self-questioning is a critical part of the EPIC model and yields multiple benefits. Reflection helps principals break down a complex process, better understand it, and recast it in a way that lets others learn by example. Reflection creates a kind of accountability for the principal and school, and at the same time generates practical details that make practices more explicit and thus more broadly accessible and applicable. For Cohort 1, cycling through questions for each practice also had drawbacks: it was repetitive, and some questions—about "personal beliefs and values" or the "emotions of change"—edged into sensitive areas. Both ran the danger of eliciting boilerplate responses from busy principals rather than the desired detail.

- **Practice Documentation.** After identifying and analyzing practices and discussing their choices with EPIC team members, principals and teams proceeded to the drafting and editing phase. Award levels determined the steps and scope of the documentation: EPIC team members made scouting and follow-up visits to Gold Gain schools to gather resources—and in some cases video—for the case study. Silver Gain schools conferred with the EPIC team by phone to complete their profiles.

Tools and Protocols, Cohort 2

Interviews with EPIC staff and Cohort 1 principals confirmed that busy principals sometimes found it hard to structure experiences and compose detailed narratives. For Cohort 2, EPIC revised the process, providing a more formal orientation, explaining the UEF domains in more detail and providing more detailed scaffolding for principals with every step of the process. Separate, less text-intensive documents accompanied each step, showing rather than describing how principals might respond. Though more structured, the process was no less reflective and rigorous, and requests for more specific connections to practice replaced more general questions about change management.

Principals who won awards in both years said the revised tools and protocols were easier to use—in the words of one principal, "logical, precise, beneficial."

The final suite of tools includes the following:

- **Principal Snapshot.** The Snapshot invites principals to list defining characteristics of their school, pressing needs, a typical day, key goals—all elements of practice or leadership that provide important context for their own or another school's investigation. In contrast to the Cohort 1 Self-Study, the Snapshot is a user-friendly, four-page survey principals can complete with relative ease. Though requiring details that prompted some principals to go back into existing documents to gather concrete information, the Snapshot avoids the Self-Study's broad inquiries about beliefs or experiences managing change.

- **Artifacts Request.** Cohort 1 guidelines encouraged principals to gather artifacts created in connection with an effective practice, and the call or visit helped them assemble pertinent documents. In Cohort 2, gathering artifacts was an integral part of the practice analysis. Principals

were asked to provide artifacts as critical evidence of the effectiveness of a practice. , The Artifacts Request form provides an easier-to-use checklist of tools that leaders use in their day-to-day work. These could include staff artifacts (organizational charts, lists of administrative teams, faculty and staff roster), professional development artifacts (calendars, teacher observation/walkthrough tools, school improvement plans), instructional artifacts (sample lesson plans or units), and student and parent artifacts (newsletters, orientation manuals).

- **Effective Practice Investigation Tool (EPI).** The EPI, the primary tool that EPIC uses to investigate school practices, is designed to assist school principals and leadership teams in studying their practices and assembling evidence of impact on student achievement. To aid schools in their investigation, the guidelines include a completed EPI example illustrating the result of one school's analysis.

   Perhaps more than any other tool, the EPI template reflects the shift to simpler protocols and a more structured investigation process. Separate text boxes ask principals to describe the practice, the need it addressed, its implementation, and evidence of effectiveness. The completed example removed any confusion not only about how a school might go about filling out the forms, but more important, how they might go about analyzing the practice.

   > " I really like the piece where they asked for evidence about the effectiveness…. I think that's important. It makes me think about how am I assessing any practice or initiative that we put in place. This ties in also to the accountability piece. I found this to be a very beneficial tool: We had to really articulate the processes that we went through— and that's not often easy to do—and document over time as well, which I find that often we forget. It's helpful to keep that record of practices, that we can learn from."

   —Denver Elementary School Principal

- **Practice Selection Rubric.** The EPI Practice Selection Rubric helps school teams select the 2-3 practices they will feature in their EPI. Although the Cohort 1 tools assumed that leadership teams and other faculty would engage in the investigation, the Practice Selection Rubric makes their participation explicit. The rubric includes criteria by which the school leadership team members 1) individually assess

each practice, 2) discuss their ratings as a team, and 3) reach consensus on the selection of the practices to be shared with EPIC. The tool probes team members to consider aspects of the practice that may or may not qualify it for further analysis and documentation. The activity fosters deliberation around a school's practices and ensures that they can be successfully documented and shared.

- **EPI Call Report.** Once the EPI has been submitted, EPIC initiates a conference call with the school, documented in the EPI Call Report. The 2-hour interview is the bridge between the two phases of the EPIC program: the school's analysis and documentation of effective practice(s) and their collaboration with EPIC to produce a case study or practice profile for the Knowledge System. The EPI Call Report captures a description of the focus practice(s), the learning opportunities afforded by it, and the story of its evolution in the school context. The unique contributions of the practice for the broader EPIC community are also assessed, using the Practice Selection Rubric.

- **Effective Practice Team School Visit Guide and Memo.** In sites identified for case studies, the EP Team also makes a two-day visit to gather more evidence about the selected practice(s) through interviews, observations, focus groups, and classroom walkthroughs. To help schools plan for the visit, the Visit Schedule Guide includes an annotated sample schedule and template the school can adapt to accommodate their needs and those of the EP Team. The tool facilitates communication between the school leaders and EP team prior to the visit.

- **Effective Practice Team Protocol.** The EP Team Protocol describes the expectations, processes, outcomes, and norms for the EP Team's site-visit work, as well as the parameters of its work before, during, and after the visit. The protocol clearly articulates the objectives for the school visit, including the on-site collection and triangulation of evidence, the development of the content for the chapters of the case study, and the writing of a site visit report. The protocol also outlines the code of conduct for the EP Team during its visit.

As noted above, the evolution from Cohort 1 to Cohort 2 shifted more of the task of analyzing practice to the EPIC Team, who continued to engage principals and teams in reflection, but more through interviews and dialogue than

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through personal self-study. Based on feedback from the principals interviewed for this brief, whose experiences are described in the next section, the revised tools facilitated the investigation and analysis process across a range of sites, with a variety of approaches to improving student achievement.

Principals' Reactions to the EPIC Process

According to these principals, the general idea of examining a practice, and evidence that links it to test scores, was not altogether new. These are not only schools singled out for awards but also self-described "data-focused," "goal-driven" schools that have already instituted or targeted a practice to raise student achievement and subjected their practice and related data to a fair amount of scrutiny.

What was different, say principals, was the depth of the EPIC process and the concrete evidence generated by the required, largely unprecedented rigor. The reflective process re-trained their focus in a number of ways. Instead of looking at what wasn't working, EPIC focused their attention on what was. In addition to focusing, as they had in the past, on "percentage-point gains," they also looked at "human data." They "sliced" practice in different ways, examining cross sections for "what was department- or team-related and what was school-wide." Most interviewees alluded in one way or another to EPIC's unique blend of a tough-minded transparency and rigor and an invitation to an expressive, discursive, collaborative storytelling that traced a practice "back to its origins."

"Those are all pieces that I'm well aware of, but sometimes digging a little bit deeper and asking me how I do that is a really good next step. I found it very beneficial and I found it challenging at first…. Sometimes what happens is that we're always moving forward so fast that we don't take the time to stop and look at what's going on to assess the current situation—but also then to look back and document our journey and what worked well and what didn't work well, so then we're able to replicate the pieces that were successful for us."

—Denver Elementary School Principal

Recounting the journey with someone outside the school was also a novel experience, and a valuable one. One principal likened the dialogue with the EPIC site team to having a "co-author" for an autobiography, and like other principals said it was a story they knew well but could not have told without help.

"It was very helpful to see how EPIC synthesized what they saw occurring in the school. I thought it was very much aligned with my philosophy, but I wouldn't have thought to articulate it in the way that they did: I generally think of what I call the teaching/learning cycle, and how I approach what teachers are doing and help assess and evaluate their work as well as our school— but I never thought of it within each initiative. They brought that to light: that that's the process we go through in the school…. We know in our heads what we've gone through, we know the process, but we haven't taken the time to really to articulate it in a way that we can convey to others."

—Denver Elementary School Principal

Outcomes

The monetary award and the recognition that came with being chosen as an EPIC school were not, according to principals, the only benefits of being part of the community. The EPIC experience gave them practical tools to explore a complicated process and to recalibrate that practice. During interviews, the six principals described other outgrowths, underway or on the horizon. The EPIC experience, they reported, has:

- **validated efforts and reaffirmed goals.** Revisiting the practices with the school team was a rewarding experience, one that "recognized staff in a positive way" and helped principals "underline the importance of some of their work" to the rest of the faculty. It helped them "keep the wheels turning in their continuous cycle of improvement," "move closer to their goals of making their efforts school-wide," and see how to "pull other people in as they go forward."

- **reinforced the value of reflection.** Principals and coaches agreed that the press of day-to-day activities leaves little time for principals to stop and reflect. With the emphasis on accelerating change they forget that they sometimes need to decelerate. EPIC, they say, helped them see that reflection is a necessity, not a luxury. A Memphis principal called reflection "Not just a way to consider the past, where you've come, but a way to plan, look ahead." This New Leaders-trained principal had heard "reflect, reflect, reflect" throughout her training, but said she only really understood its value during the EPIC investigation.

- **separated teachers from the issue.** Noting occasional push-back from teachers who feel they or students are being singled out for underperformance, principals (and coaches) observed that this process helps school teams step back and look at an instructional need from a different perspective. This detachment encourages buy-in from teachers because it focuses not on them but on practice.

- **changed how they document practice.** Interestingly, the EPIC component principals mentioned—and adopted—most frequently was documentation. The EPIC model helped them understand "how to document practice in a systematic way," and they became more deliberate about "keeping a record of their journey." This was more than better bookkeeping; documenting practice helped principals "hone in on a practice" and "focus on leadership."

"For me, it was a way to organize my journal notes [so] that I could look back at them and use them to form goals for the next school year, for myself and the school…to sit down and reflect on just how effective the leadership team was, or just how much impact a strong leadership team or strong principal made. EPIC made me sit down and take time to do more than scratch notes in a journal."

—Memphis Elementary Principal

- **improved teacher evaluations and classroom observations.** Principals also adopted approaches modeled during the EPIC investigation and the EP Team school visits. A Boston principal now uses some of the self-study questions in management evaluations. A Denver principal says he asks open-ended questions rather than rating scales during teacher evaluations, encouraging teachers to reflect on practice and share how it affects student achievement. In classroom observations, he used to take copious notes, often missing the big picture. Now he "reads the walls" and "watches engagement."

- **supported school and district continuous improvement efforts.** Principals said the experiences helped with overall school improvement efforts and specific initiatives such as RTI (Response to Intervention). In reference to the latter, a Denver principal said that, after the EPIC investigation, they are "miles ahead."

- **helped recruit, orient, and screen new faculty.** Being more self-aware of why a particular practice is effective helps principals not only highlight accomplishments for prospective teachers but also introduce them to their school culture and practice—and see whether interviewees are a good fit.

"Going through the process made us think more in terms of new teachers and new faculty, and what we needed to do to make sure they knew about [our practices and approaches], as they are coming on. …Anytime you're looking at questions that someone from outside the school is asking, it helps you think about how you'd explain things to people who haven't been with you for a long time."

—Boston Charter School Principal

The EPIC Knowledge System

The more tangible outcome of the investigation of practice is the EPIC Knowledge System, the online platform that debuted in 2008 with Cohort 1 cases and profiles that other urban schools can use to improve student performance.

A primary audience for the Knowledge System is the New Leaders principals-in-training, or residents, and the coaches who train and support them. Other audiences include principals, assistant principals, school leadership teams, leadership coaches and teachers.

The coaches we interviewed see the Knowledge System not only as the capstone of the investigation process but also "what was missing" in their training toolkit. They are pleased that the "vast body of New Leaders knowledge is captured" in an easily accessible form. "So much of the work is anecdotal," said one coach, "it's good that someone is working to assemble, document, package for others to look at and replicate."

This section looks at the instructional design and content of the Knowledge System and at the supports designed to promote implementation of case studies in self-study and job-embedded professional development. Following the review of the Knowledge System is a discussion of the ways coaches and principals have used it thus far and their recommendations for enhancing its use.

The EPIC Change and Instructional Design Model

The Knowledge System contains case studies and practice profiles that can be used to examine a specific practice related to Learning and Teaching, School Culture, or Leadership. The case studies provide rich descriptions of the evolution of effective practices in a wide range of public and char-

ter, elementary and secondary schools in cities across the nation. A structured narrative tells the story of the practice through a series of chapters that describe how the need for the practice was initially identified, what groundwork had to be laid, the tools and routines around the practice, what obstacles were met and what was learned in the process, how the practice has been adapted and improved, and its future. In selected cases, videos embedded in the chapters show users what the practice looks and sounds like. Related artifacts may also be available to view or download.

The practice profiles also capture the evolution of a practice as a result of its documentation and analysis by school leaders. These pieces follow the same structure as the cases and also provide downloadable school artifacts related to the featured practice. Although they lack the breadth of the cases, the profiles look deeply at a discrete practice. Stylistically, the profiles are presented in a single webpage, with a combination of first-person narrative (the principal's reflections), interview Q&A (with the principal and/or school leaders), and summaries.

Case studies and profiles are built from the same blueprint or change model as the investigation and analysis process itself: Analyze and Plan, Implement, Reflect, Adapt and Improve. These two types of resources provide users with situated, highly descriptive instruction, rather than guiding them through a prescriptive process with recipe-like formulas. Users of the Knowledge System also benefit from an in-

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> —Milwaukee New Leaders Coach

structional design that captures and structures explicit and tacit knowledge, provides problem-solving strategies, and inculcates a culture of sharing. Like most effective instructional design models, the Knowledge System model takes into account the learning needs and constraints of audiences —in this case school leaders, leadership teams, teachers, and coaches or staff developers—and offers self-study and facilitation supports accordingly.

A component of the Knowledge System design that makes it unique, even in comparison to models that provide repeated opportunities for self-evaluation, is the emphasis on reflection. Throughout the cases and profiles, users are encouraged to pause, think about the ideas, and connect them to their own practice. This is, of course, a key component of the EPIC investigation or change model itself. Both rely on questions to prompt reflection, and each case and profile includes questions that are, by turn, fairly direct—like the "Clarifying Questions" that ask users to recall what the challenge was, or how a school addressed it—or indirect, like the "Questions for Self-Reflection," and "Discussion Questions" that help users connect the challenges or practice to their own situation. In pedagogical terms, the design relies on both didactic and Socratic questioning.

Alignment to Adult Learning Theory

The Knowledge System also reflects current research about how adults learn. A central component of the system is its focus on experiential learning. In clear language and presentation, the system gives principals access to actual practices, chronicled in concrete details, and supported by key artifacts and data confirming achievement gains. Coach-

es concur that the cases and profiles "get to the point," and that principals will find "something that will hit on exactly what they're dealing with."

Adults need resources that accommodate busy schedules, and the Knowledge System's online delivery allows users to engage in anytime, anywhere learning and job-embedded professional development. It doesn't, according to one EPIC principal, "take principals away from the building," and even an administrator who "can't pick up the phone can log in." A web-based resource also gives users control over their learning. Principals can select the practices to explore, and those interviewed are excited about learning from other schools. They believe in professional learning communities, and say this "feels like a community." As one coach noted, "A principal's job can be very isolating, and within the authority structure, there is no one a principal can go to for feedback. The Knowledge System provides a safe, nonthreatening environment to have reflective conversations: not in front of parents, or faculty…a very useful support for building leaders."

"The Knowledge System allows you to go in and pick and choose what you need vs. having to sit through a class or conference in which you hear a lot of stuff, but it might be two in the afternoon before you say, 'Oh, that's what I really need.' It also will spark you to think about things you didn't know you needed. "

—Milwaukee New Leaders Coach

Although self-study is an important part of adult learning, the Knowledge System need not be a solitary venture and can encourage and support actual as well as virtual learning communities. In addition to its use in a facilitated environment (see

below), the virtual resources, noted one principal, can be the catalyst for phone or email exchanges, face-to-face conversations within a district, and travel to other schools.

Professional Development Tools and Features

Included in the cases and profiles are tools and features that help users adapt practices to their own needs and environments. An easy-to-use online interface allows Knowledge System users to locate the school type, practice, or grade level that fits their needs. Some cases and profiles include a school achievement overview, providing additional information on achievement gains, as well as demographics and links to school websites. The following describes the key features of the system, and recommendations, based on the content analysis, for enhancing their use for principals' self-study or facilitated professional development.

- *Artifacts.* Each case study and profile contains relevant school artifacts, giving other principals and school leaders access to the tools used by the school in their day-to-day work. Such artifacts include team and meeting rosters, teacher evaluation forms, school improvement plans, and other professional development documents; instructional artifacts such as sample lesson plans; and newsletters, dress codes, and other student and parent artifacts.

  A convenient "About this Artifact" link gives users a summary and print or download option. A cover-page list of artifacts could make these available to users who don't visit every chapter. Artifacts go a long way in helping users understand and adapt a practice. The absence of important artifacts from a profile or case detracts from their usefulness. Identifying and obtaining relevant artifacts is sometimes a challenge for the EPIC team, but every effort should be made to locate and publish key artifacts.

- *Videos.* Embedded in some narratives are professional-quality videos that accomplish the "heavy lifting" of the case study: The video allows users to see "practices in action" and listen in as principals and teachers reflect on the everyday implications of the practice in the school. Facilitators see the video as a key feature and "reference point" for most users. Additional media could give users an easier introduction to the school. Even without a site visit, cases and profiles could include audio files. Audio files or podcasts could also be played during professional development sessions, which is preferable to being read to

by a facilitator. More images would provide a better sense for the context.

- *Facilitator's Guide.* Facilitator's guides for selected chapters outline the learning goals and suggest various activities—whole-group warm-ups, video-viewing, whole- and small-group discussions, share-outs—for using a case or profile in a professional development setting. Like the cases and profiles themselves, the guides provide concrete, vivid details about the challenges in a school and practices that evolved to meet them.

Connecting to Practice

The Knowledge System is designed to help users adapt a practice and ultimately improve achievement, which makes the Connecting to Your Practice sections so critical. Though the case studies capture the evolution of the practice, the connection between the practice and student achievement gains is not always perfectly clear. Questions about why that practice was believed to be related to increased gains could ensure that users make the connection. Some references may also need clarification.

Cases and profiles are fairly explicit about the time it takes for practices to become part of school culture and for change to result. Representing this graphically in a timeline or flow chart could show users not only how long it takes but also "when to push the levers." (One EPIC principal suggested that the EPI tool include a timeline to help school teams reconstruct the steps involved in their effective practice.) Budgets and line items are also important to school leaders who are often asked to do more with less. Although several cases and profiles alluded to the need to creatively absorb new costs, artifacts related to budgeting may be useful.

More voices and perspectives in the narrative and videos (more teachers and students, as well as parents, school board members, and other stakeholders) could also strengthen some cases. In some profiles the process is almost invisible; the format suggests that only the principal was involved and the information reported is based solely on her opinion. Some questions stick close to the practice and the information in the profile, while others (more helpfully) use the profile to examine the ideas from multiple perspectives.

PART III:

Initial and Potential
Use of the
EPIC Knowledge System

Coaches interviewed for this brief agreed that the Knowledge System adds an important professional development resource to their toolkit, one that could redefine how they train prospective principals and how they support practicing ones. "There's nothing like this," said coaches, "[it offers] concrete, contextualized examples of everything we've been talking about." For principals who "know what they need" but not "what it looks like," the Knowledge System "exposes principals to good models." Most interviewees also stressed a point made elsewhere in this brief—that providing models of what real principals in real schools do is especially important for urban schools because these schools look like theirs. As one coach said, raising achievement is no longer "pie in the sky" when principals can see "how to do it."

Describing ways that the Knowledge System could enrich their training, coaches said the resources could:

- **help them customize training and maximize their time.** Coaches who work with principals-in-training, residents, and post-resident principals agreed that a key benefit of the Knowledge System was its adaptability to individual needs. It can, they say, help them answer specific questions:

"What does effective instruction look like?" "How do I observe a practice?" "How do I work with teachers' long-range professional growth throughout the year?" Coaches explained that a training session might require focusing on "a single issue" or "breaking an issue down into steps." The Knowledge System and a fast click does that for them. It provides the "springboard," and coaches can do the "filling in."

- **fit multiple training scenarios.** Training periods can range from full or half-day training to 15 minutes snatched out of a principal's busy day and may involve group or one-on-one sessions. The Knowledge System, say coaches, can accommodate all these. If time permits, they can take a "deep dive" into a case or profile. If not, they can show a video clip, ask principals to explore it on their own, then debrief at a later session. This flexibility could help them to establish a "cycle," "tempo," or "rhythm" of school-year coaching and reinforce the "value of ongoing learning."

- **reduce the need to reteach and reinvent the wheel.** Coaches say they often find themselves reteaching what they have covered before, and find principals, individually, reinventing the wheel. The Knowledge System could help avoid that: Instead of re-creating a strategy or policy, high-need, early turnaround schools could learn from others and replicate instead. In the end this could help schools "ramp up faster" or "bend the learning curve."

- **serve as both a public and private resource.** Coaches look forward to learning more about when and why effective use of the Knowledge System might require a facilitator, and what various users, at various stages of training, might need. One coach called this the "crosswalk" factor, or the fact that a practice that is specific to a city school system still has to be generic enough to meet the needs of a larger audience. Another coach predicted that busy prospective or practicing principals might need an introduction to the system before they could use it for their own self-study.

- **clarify leadership roles.** Coaches say that it is easy for principals, even with solid training, to fall into a "managerial role." By capturing effective practices in the words of principals and highlighting their leadership roles, the Knowledge System can help prospective or practicing principals focus on leadership and build leadership capacity among faculty members. As one coach noted, principals have to "walk and chew gum" at the same time, and the Knowledge System can help them understand what it means to be an instructional leader, a role most want to play and can define in the abstract but may not be able to translate into practice.

- **offer a common language.** Reiterating the EPIC call for precision and clarity, coaches also said that the system could provide a "new lexicon" or "common language" that avoided eduspeak and showed principals, for example, "here's what we mean when we're talking about data."

- **support coaches' own collaborative work.** In addition to fostering a community among schools and school leaders, the Knowledge System, say coaches, can strengthen their own community and collective discussions of how to diagnose issues and suggest strategies for improvement.

Principals also shared initial reactions to the Knowledge System. For most, seeing their own case or profile was a "humbling" experience, and the pride inspired by the EPIC award only increased when they saw their efforts showcased and made available to educators nationwide. Beyond the gratifying publicity, principals also see the Knowledge System as a tool that fits with their schedules and makes self-study and sharing and learning from one another possible. A charter school principal stressing the value of sharing and dissemination—and noting that being part of the EPIC community with access to the Knowledge System was as "big a motivator as the award." He said, "It's good to know things can be used beyond the wall of a charter school."

**More specifically, principals said
an online resource could:**

- **offer a school preview and orientation for new hires.** Most principals said they could see using the Knowledge System to introduce new teachers to their schools.

- **help them work with teachers on individual goals.** Principals looked forward to becoming more familiar with the site so they can direct individual teachers or those engaged in small-group staff development sessions to specific cases or profiles. For example, a charter school principal was especially interested in finding schools that are using data to unpack instruction, looking at what teachers and students are doing in classrooms every day and what data are showing.

- **enhance public relations and communication with parents.** The award and video showcasing have become a public relations tool in some districts, giving them more visibility. "We're famous," said one principal, which is "good for our population." This principal also used the published version as a formal, celebratory EPIC wrap-up, bringing in the larger school faculty.

Principals have also used the published case studies or profiles as a communication tool for parents. Some have made the information available on their websites and used the case for open houses and school tours. A District of Columbia principal says that the information helps promote the school and inform "a new constituency of parents" looking for evidence of performance. Principals have also used the published cases and profiles in parent resource centers. The result is that parents can now better understand "practices that improve teaching and student achievement." Other communication and public relations include sharing the value of the EPIC process with a Charter Organization board and including the award and published case when fundraising and writing grants.

PART IV:

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Study

We believe that the findings reported here argue for further development of effective practice cases and profiles to add to an already rich resource, and for wider availability to other educators. The EPIC model and Knowledge System provide a full research and dissemination cycle and complement of resources, which are valuable for prospective and practicing principals in search of self-study resources as well as for school leadership teams engaged in collective reflection on effective practices—and for the coaches who support school leaders at various stages and in various settings.

The positive experiences and outcomes described by our small sample of principals and coaches also suggest a need for further evaluation, to see if outcomes hold true across larger samples and to assess the impact of more in-depth implementations of the EPIC model and Knowledge System. Principals suggest, for example, that the EPIC experience helped them reset the pace of change, articulating needs sooner and getting existing and new faculty on board. Research on the longer-term impact of their experience, and on the ways others might follow their example, could contribute not only to the understanding of the impact and

sustainability of the EPIC model and Knowledge System but also to the knowledge base of what propels change and student achievement gains in urban schools. This research, within and beyond the New Leaders and EPIC communities, could include:

- *an in-depth study of implementation.* A study of more sustained implementation could provide valuable data on how leaders learn from the EPIC process and Knowledge System, and what levels of training, use, and ongoing support are needed to propel changes in leadership and

> *"It was very helpful to see how EPIC synthesized what they saw occurring in the school. I thought it was very much aligned with my philosophy, but I wouldn't have thought to articulate it in the way that they did — but I never thought of it within each initiative. They brought that to light.… We know in our heads what we've gone through, we know the process, but we haven't taken the time to really articulate it in a way that we can convey to others."*
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> —Denver Elementary School Principal

increases in student achievement. Such a study could explore, for example, the relative value of facilitated and nonfacilitated use, the ways in which principals transfer knowledge and build leadership capacity, and the links between professional development and desired outcomes, whether they be shared leadership, improved classroom practice, or achievement gains.

A companion study to explore sustained implementation in different contexts (grade levels, high/low performing schools, urban environments, limited or whole school buy-in, central or distributed leadership) could help tease out site factors that ensure or hinder successful implementation and real changes in leadership, practice, and student gains.

- *research on coaching strategies and the role of coaches in leadership development.* Coaches who provide leadership training can provide valuable feedback on the professional development value of the Knowledge System to prospective and practicing principals. Training logs tied to specific cases and Facilitator's Guides could contribute to the continued development of the EPIC model and Knowledge System. Periodic surveys and interviews could gather data on the relative effectiveness of questioning and facilitation methods (e.g., didactic or Socratic). Online focus groups bringing coaches from different regions and venues together could define the role of coaching in different urban environments and gather practices that promote leadership.

- *further content analysis.* A more thorough and ongoing content analysis, building on the criteria and rubric created for this brief, could help monitor and refine the evolution of the EPIC model and Knowledge System. Having potential users within and outside the EPIC community analyze the content, individually or in focus groups, could pinpoint what different users in different contexts are looking for (e.g., the kinds of data and documentation) to replicate or to adapt practices and improve achievement in their own schools or districts. An analysis such as this could assess ease of use and navigational features and other usability topics and also provide valuable feedback on stages, settings, and school issues for which principals could profit from interaction with colleagues or facilitators.

- *study of dissemination to wider audiences.* A dissemination study could explore how other educators might use the Knowledge System and the value of wider promotion and exposure. A modest pilot effort might involve an open forum on the site that invited comments. A larger study could extend an invitation to educators in different regions, positions, and urban school environments to explore the site and record their observations (in an online form). Interviews, online focus groups, or regional face-to-face sessions could expand on responses. Topics for study could, again, extend from usability to the broader use and benefits of an online resource for leadership development.

MetLife Foundation

MetLife Foundation supports education, health, civic and cultural organizations. It seeks to increase opportunities for young people to succeed, encourage leadership development for teachers and principals, and connect schools, families and communities. Its funding for education is informed by findings from the annual MetLife Survey of the American Teacher. For more information visit www.metlife.org.

New Leaders for New Schools ensures high academic achievement for every student by attracting and preparing outstanding leaders and supporting the performance of the urban public schools they lead at scale. New Leaders was founded in 2000 and operates today in ten cities: Bay Area (CA), Baltimore, Charlotte, Chicago, Memphis, Milwaukee, Greater New Orleans, New York City, Prince Georges County (MD), and Washington, DC. More than a principal training program, New Leaders for New Schools is a national movement of leaders with an unwavering commitment to ensure that every student achieves academic excellence. For more information visit www.nlns.org.

The Effective Practice Incentive Community drives student performance by rewarding educators in schools making student achievement gains for sharing effective practices with colleagues in their own district and with educators across the country. The EPIC program was founded in 2006 by New Leaders for New Schools and operates in partnership with the Denver Public Schools, District of Columbia Public Schools, Memphis City Schools, and a consortium of more than 140 charter schools across the nation. As of June 2009, more than 65 case studies and profiles of EPIC awarded schools are available on the EPIC Knowledge System. For more information visit www.nlns.org/epic.jsp.

Rockman et al is an independent research, evaluation, and consulting firm focusing on education, technology, and media. Rockman works with preschool, K-12, postsecondary, and adult educational institutions on formal educational initiatives, and with museums, foundations, private industry, and other groups on informal education initiatives. Rockman has often served as external evaluator for projects funded by grants from the U.S. Department of Education and the National Science Foundation. Other clients include the California, Indiana, and West Virginia State Departments of Education; the National Endowment for the Arts; the George Lucas Educational Foundation; the American Museum of Natural History; the California Academy of Sciences; the Corporation for Public Broadcasting; Intel; Microsoft; Sylvan Learning; and universities around the country. For more information visit www.rockman.com.

For more information about the Effective Practice
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