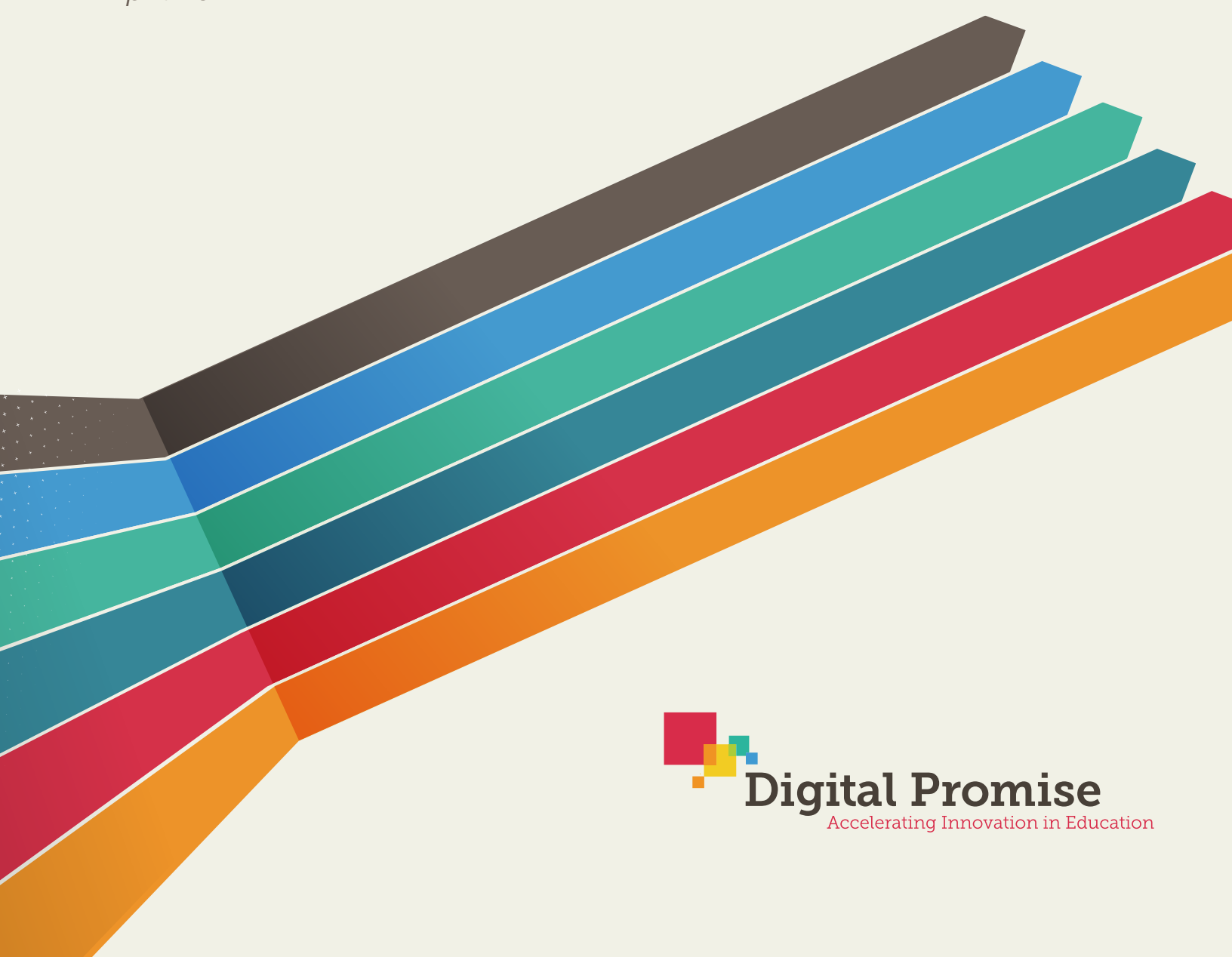


# Understanding the Benefits of Participating in the League of Innovative Schools

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# Executive Summary

Digital Promise is an independent, bipartisan 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization authorized by Congress to spur innovation in education and improve the opportunity to learn through technology and research. Positioned at the intersection of educators, entrepreneurs, and researchers, Digital Promise identifies, develops, and promotes strategies to improve all levels of education and provide Americans with the knowledge and skills needed to compete in the global economy.

In 2012, Digital Promise created the League of Innovative Schools (League), a membership network of the most forward-thinking and innovative districts in the country. By working together on shared priorities – and partnering with leading entrepreneurs, researchers, and education leaders – League districts pioneer innovative learning and leadership practices with the goal of improving outcomes for students and helping prepare them for learning for life.

This paper investigates the perceived benefits that participating in the League has had on K-12 public school district leaders in the network. Our findings from surveys and interviews with district leaders indicate that participation in the League has benefitted district members in their professional development and in the strategies they deploy to support the districts and schools they serve.

Membership in the League provides perceived benefits such as professional growth and an expanded regional and national network for district leaders. Additionally, League members reported an increased ability for district leaders to innovate and an increased number of opportunities for students and teachers.

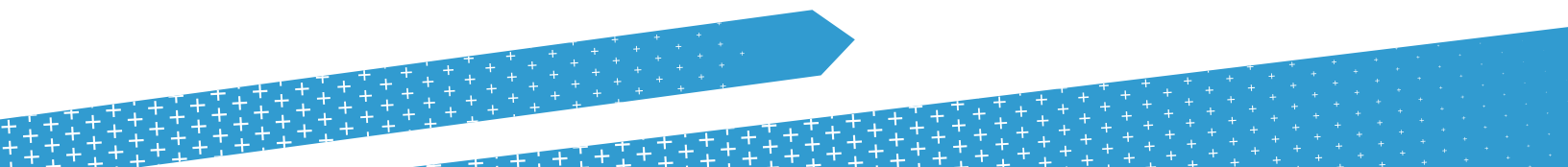
For example, when asked whether League membership has increased their capacity to innovate, 81.3 percent of district leaders responded “Yes.” Jared Cotton, Superintendent of Henry County Public Schools in Collinsville, Virginia, shared that being a part of the League “has pushed me to innovate and think outside the box. It has also given me the courage to take risks because my colleagues in the League are taking risks and doing great things for children.”

Additionally, 81.3 percent of respondents reported their students have benefited from their membership in the League. Calvin Watts, Superintendent of Kent School District (KSD) in Kent Washington, reported, “KSD is focused on leveraging our robust technology infrastructure to enhance and advance instruction and career connected learning opportunities for students. Strategies and work group discussions in [League] meetings have enabled KSD to move from planning to initial stages of implementation.”

The majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that membership has positively impacted their ability to support their districts through an increase in the number of services,

programs and initiatives, and specifically programs for their underserved students. Members are also eager to share the work they do. As Erin English, Director of Online and Blended Learning in a League district, the Vista Unified School District in California, stated, "If we can transform education with our population including 60 percent of students on free and reduced lunch and 10 percent homeless, others can, too. We want to be a model for the rest of the nation" (ASCD).

This report considers the perceived benefits League membership provides district leaders', in areas such as professional development, professional networks, and strategies to support the districts and schools they serve. The longer a leader has been in the network, the more they report increases in their ability to innovate. Survey feedback indicates that the League is a valuable and beneficial network, helping members continue to drive toward the mission of spurring innovation and improving the opportunity to learn for all through technology and research.



# Introduction

American education has pockets of excellence that rival the most successful systems elsewhere in the world. However, huge gaps exist between learning outcomes, graduation rates, and college-readiness of students of different races, socioeconomic statuses, and geographical locations. Differences between high-performing and underperforming schools are due, in part, to differences in access to funding and resources, community commitment, and the willingness of school leaders to innovate (Darling-Hammond, Zieleski, and Goldman 2014). Technology offers a tremendous opportunity to support learning in new and varied ways that can help close these gaps (Ibid.).

Networks enable entities operating in various contexts and sectors to collaborate with one another “according to their interests and expertise while sustaining collective attention on progress toward common goals” (Bryk, Gomez, and Grunow, 2011). The League of Innovative Schools (League) is Digital Promise’s flagship network connecting and rallying the most forward-thinking leaders of the nation’s school districts. A vibrant professional learning network, the League is empowering school districts and district leaders to become better producers and consumers of innovative approaches to teaching and learning – and making sure that the most effective practices are broadly shared so they may scale.

The League acts as an innovation intermediary to support school districts by initiating, facilitating, and supporting collaborations and partnerships across the public and private sectors to promote innovative best practices in K-12 public schools. According to Dalziel

and Parjanen (2012) and Howells (2006), innovation intermediaries are “organizations or groups within organizations that work to enable innovation, either directly by enabling the innovativeness of one or more firms, or indirectly enhancing national, regional, or sectoral innovative capacity.” This report discusses the perceived benefits district leaders associate with their membership in the League.

## Exploring The League of Innovative Schools

Our coalition of 86 districts across 33 states, serving more than 3.3 million students, has grown to reflect the national scope and diversity of public education in the U.S., and includes urban school districts in New York City, the District of Columbia, and Baltimore; suburban districts that serve auto towns, refugee communities, and coastal areas; rural districts in Kentucky, Alaska, and Alabama; and border communities in Texas.

To become a member of the League, a district superintendent submits an application that is evaluated according to the following criteria: vision for innovation, proven record of successful implementation, school leadership and teacher engagement, community engagement, and impact on underserved students. Following the evaluation, the top 25 percent are invited for an interview with the League's Advisory Board, a group of seven superintendents that guide the direction and activities of the League. The highest scoring candidates are considered and admitted based on the availability of openings in the network and the need to maintain balance in the network among districts with differing characteristics.

Upon acceptance into the League, superintendents and their district leaders engage in various activities and events including collaborating with school districts across the country; building powerful cross-sector networks with research institutions and education-focused companies; and sharing best practices and ideas through diverse tools and stories. The League network is developed and nurtured through biannual meetings that occur in the fall and spring. The goal of every League meeting is to address shared priorities and take action, as well as to provide opportunities for building and maintaining meaningful relationships and connections.

During and between these meetings, district leaders, researchers, and corporate and thought partners contribute ideas and best practices to advance progress on topics of interest such as:

- competency-based education;
- maker learning;
- personalized learning;
- professional development; and
- open education resources.

Addressing this dynamic range of issues ensures that the League remains relevant to the changing needs of district leaders, and that ideas move to action and implementation. Each topic-focused group provides district leaders the opportunity to learn from and support each other while collaborating on tangible work products, including publications, tools, and strategies for providing high-quality learning opportunities for students.

Although the League's activities are focused on district leaders, the network is strengthened by inter-sectoral connections between educators, researchers, and corporate and thought partners, who are considered partners of the League. In this way, the League works as an innovation intermediary, facilitating innovation by supporting and enabling the ability of district leaders and partners to innovate.

"[The League has] pushed me to innovate and think outside the box. It has also given me the courage to take risks because my colleagues in the League are taking risks and doing great things for children."

- Jared Cotton, Superintendent of Henry County Public Schools in Collinsville, Virginia

According to Ryan Imbriale, Executive Director of Innovative Learning of Baltimore County Public Schools in Baltimore, Maryland, "Thanks to the work with the League we are expanding offerings around micro-credentials and maker learning and we created two successful computational thinking magnet schools. None of these programs would be where they are without our connections in the League."

The goal of this study was to build on anecdotal evidence of the value of League to better understand how participation benefits its district leader members and ultimately their teachers and students. In the next section, we present the methods used to collect data from members.

# Theory of Change

To identify the perceived values the League membership has on education leaders, we asked members to reflect on the benefits they attribute to their membership.

Using a logic model, we provide a general theory of change to explain how the League acts as an innovation intermediary. Please see Appendix A for the full logic model.

## League Activities and Goals

By investing in and utilizing Digital Promise's network and knowledge base, the League connects district leaders with colleagues in research and technology to share best practices; facilitates connections that lead to additive resources for districts; shares and manages research and knowledge; and provides professional development opportunities for district leaders.

These activities are designed to support professional growth for district leaders and create a valuable regional and national education network. Additionally, the League intends to increase support for district leaders to innovate and an increase in educational opportunities for students. These goals serve to support the overall goal of the League, which is to empower teachers and to introduce innovative models for schools and innovative teaching practices in public schools.

"Every time I interact with a League district or League/Digital Promise staff, I learn something and/or can better provide a service to my district. I see this strengthening and growing in the future, as I become connected with more innovators."

- Mary Wegner, Superintendent of Sitka School District



# Methods

## Sample

The League currently has 86 districts that are a part of the network, with variable lengths of membership starting from 2011 to the present. This study employed a mixed methods approach to gather quantitative and qualitative survey data from each participating district to understand the perceived benefits of League membership. Superintendents and other leaders from each of these districts were invited to complete a survey on their experience with the League and how it has affected their ability to innovate in their districts. We received 75 responses, with completed surveys from 54 superintendents and 21 district leaders. Members from 64 out of the 86 League districts completed the survey (74.4 percent).

The survey consisted of 36 multiple choice and open-ended questions, including:

- Eight questions asking about basic demographic information such as name, email, district location, number of students, and the percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price school meals;
- Five questions regarding the respondent's length of membership in and satisfaction with the League;
- Nine questions asking about professional development benefits;
- Ten questions about building and fostering regional and national networks;
- Two questions asking about support for innovation by district leaders; and
- Two questions regarding student educational opportunities.

We hypothesized that districts that have been in the League for a period of 4 or 5 years of time compared to members joining in the last 3 years would indicate greater benefits of League membership. To test this, we ran linear regression models predicting responses based on the number of years a district has been a member of the League.

## Demographics

The following table shows the current demographics of all districts in the League, as compared to the demographics of the districts that responded to the survey. Large, urban districts were underrepresented in the respondent sample.

	<b>All Districts in the League</b>	<b>Survey Population</b>
<b>Size</b>	26 Small districts (<5,000 students) (30.2%)	23 Small districts (<5,000 students) (35.0%)
	43 Medium districts (>5,000 and <30,000 students) (50.0%)	34 Medium districts (>5,000 and <30,000 students) (53.1%)
	17 Large districts (>30,000 students) (19.8%)	7 Large districts (>30,000 students) (10.9%)
<b>Community</b>	21 Rural districts (24.4%)	19 Rural districts (29.7%)
	41 Suburban districts (47.7%)	32 Suburban districts (50.0%)
	24 Urban districts (27.9%)	13 Urban districts (20.3%)
<b>Students living in poverty</b>	58 percent of League members serve a student population in which over 40 percent are eligible for free and reduced lunch (FRL)	61 percent of League members surveyed serve a student population in which over 40 percent are eligible for free and reduced lunch (FRL)

## Results

### Professional growth for district leaders

Survey results suggests that many district leaders were motivated to join the League to learn with and from their peers and share practices. Ninety-six percent of League district leaders currently belong to professional development networks outside the League. When asked whether they considered the League to be more valuable compared to other networks, over half agreed.

League leaders were then asked to rate how valuable they viewed their professional development experience with the League, choosing from a variety of statements on a

scale of one to five, with one being “Strongly Disagree” and five being “Strongly Agree.”

The average rating for the five questions is 4.558, with district leaders feeling most strongly about League membership being valuable for their districts and for them professionally (see Figure 1).

One of the most powerful professional growth opportunities Digital Promise offers League members is the biannual meetings, where district leaders, researchers, and education-focused entrepreneurs come together to share best practices, build relationships, and learn innovative principles that they can employ in their own districts. Mary Wegner, Superintendent of Sitka School District in

## Questions related to professional development

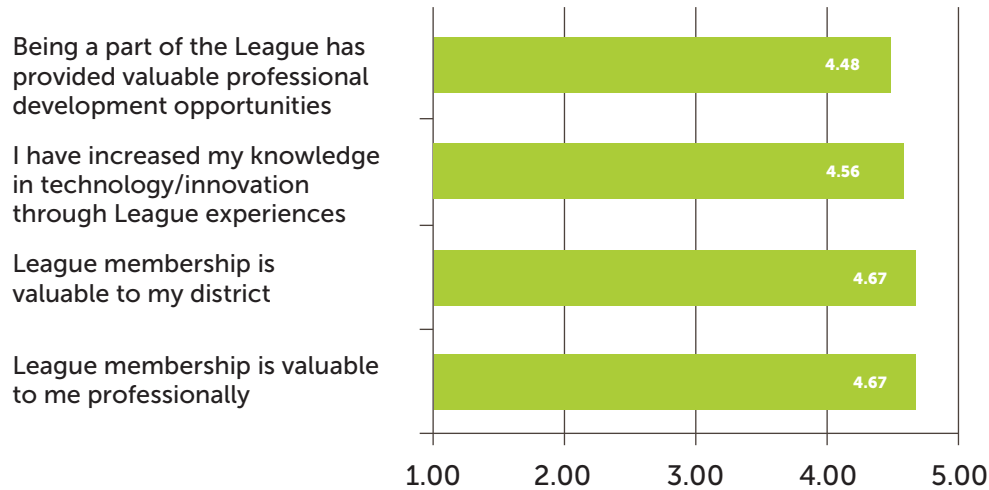


Figure 1:

Survey results assessing district leaders' professional development experience with the League

Sitka, Alaska, stated, "Every time I interact with a League district or League/Digital Promise staff, I learn something and/or can better provide a service to my district. I see this strengthening and growing in the future, as I become connected with more innovators. I hope to expand my network around League projects to colleagues in Alaska."

The district leaders also state that participation in a network of like-minded colleagues who are willing to take calculated risks, and are frequently early adopters of technologies designed to better support all learners, is a valuable asset to their professional development. Ninety-two percent of district leaders reported that League membership has provided them with opportunities to share and learn best practices with their peers and in the larger educational community. Kyle Siech, Director of Technology and Information Services of the Howard-Suamico School District in Green Bay, Wisconsin, stated, "Through the continued collaboration and networking, I feel the League provides a

platform for us to stay connected, [and] support each other to influence others to meet the needs of all learners."

For district leaders who are constantly innovating in their careers, it can be difficult to innovate without support from a network to learn from and rely on. Nearly all respondents (97 percent) stated that the League has provided them opportunities to network with other innovative leaders. Valerie Truesdale, Chief Technology, Personalization, and Engagement Officer of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in Charlotte, North Carolina, stated, "I cannot imagine leading innovation without the benefit of League districts and their collective wisdom. The Digital Learning Conversion in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has been informed to a large degree by networking with other districts engaged in digital learning. The instructional shift necessary to educate students in the digital age has been influenced by our learning from other League districts as well as League partners."

## Building and fostering regional and national networks

In addition to the biannual meetings, Digital Promise facilitates numerous ways for district leaders to get involved throughout the year.

Figure 2 shows how often district leaders communicate with Digital Promise staff, corporate partners, or other League districts. Consistent communication is critical to developing the League as not only a network, but a community of practice. Communities of practice are “joint enterprise[s] as understood and continually renegotiated by [their] members” through a shared engagement and understanding binding members together (Lave and Wenger, 2008). Beyond the League meetings, district leaders participate in working groups where they generate deliverables, webinars, and white papers that contribute to the education community. They also visit each other’s districts to see innovation in action and learn best practices. As of January 2016, district leaders across the network reported that collectively, at least 900 of their staff and teachers have visited other districts in the League. It takes “time and sustained interaction,” to build a community of practice that develops “a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, [and] tools” (Wenger, 2009).

Over the past five years, the League network and community of practice has grown, partially because 76 percent of districts have recommended that other districts apply for membership in the League. This growth has paved the way for regional connections across the League and beyond. Jeff Terry, Chief Information Officer of Roanoke County Public Schools in Roanoke, Virginia, stated, “Our membership in the League will help us lead and organize our Connected Regions Initiative. This will be a collaboration of as many as 35 districts [in Virginia].” Terry also mentioned that in

### How often do you communicate with the League (Digital Promise League team, League corporate partners, other League districts)?

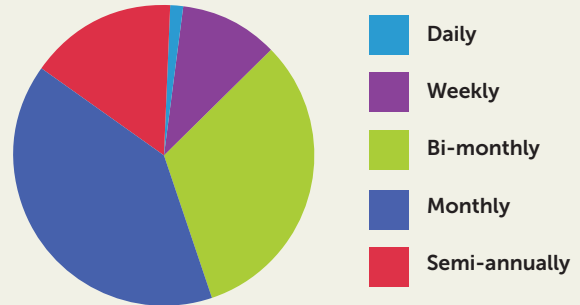


Figure 2: Survey results indicating how often respondents communicate with League districts.

addition to benefits at the district level, “students have [also] enjoyed collaborating with students in other League districts.”

Regionally, some League districts have joined Education Innovation Clusters, which are regional communities of practice that bring together educators, entrepreneurs, funders, researchers, and other community stakeholders (families, local governments, non-profits) to support innovative teaching and learning in particular regions. League districts are part of clusters in the Pittsburgh area, the Kentucky Valley, and the San Diego region. Through meetings and knowledge sharing, Digital Promise provides research and networking support to these Education Innovation Clusters so that they can develop into stronger networks supporting K-12 public education within the regions where they are present.

In addition to regional connections, the League facilitates relationships across district and state boundaries. For example, three superintendents from California, Ohio, and Wisconsin met at a

League meeting and laid the groundwork for their districts to participate in an interstate, interdisciplinary competency-based education project. Not only did the district leaders work with one another to develop a course, teachers from all three districts began interacting with one another, and students were assigned to cross-district and cross-state groups. Now in its second year, the project continues to serve as an exemplar that other districts within the League look to as a model for collaboration beyond district and state boundaries.

### Increased support for district leaders to innovate

By providing professional development opportunities and cultivating a network, Digital Promise aims at increasing the ability of district leaders to innovate. When asked whether League membership has increased their ability to innovate, 81.3 percent stated, “Yes.” District leaders also stated that the League has increased their ability to effectively support their administrators and teachers—on a scale of 1 to 5 (one being “not at all” and five being “to a great extent”), the average response was 4.05 for administrators and 4.12 for teachers.

When asked specifically, in the survey, how district leaders were able to innovate, they responded with the following:

Build/expand my maker learning program	77.0%
Provide instructional support to teachers	54.1%
Engage in ed-tech research	44.6%
Offer educator micro-credentials	43.2%
Teach computational thinking	37.8%
Improve competency-based education offerings	33.8%

Sixty-eight percent of respondents indicated that being a member of the League has provided opportunities to connect with researchers and ed-tech providers. For example, Aileen Owens, Director of Technology and Innovation of the South Fayette Township School District in Pennsylvania, described how through a grant from Digital Promise, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the National Sciences Foundation, her district was able to conduct research to prove their computational thinking programs are benefiting students.

Furthermore, 62.7 percent of respondents indicated that they have gained national recognition for local innovation. Digital Promise works to showcase examples of excellence within all League districts. League district leaders have been recognized by the national and educational press, including outlets such as *The New York Times*, NPR, *The Huffington Post*, *TIME*, *BuzzFeed*, *USA Today*, *Education Week*, *EdSurge*, and more.

### Increased opportunities for students

For district leaders, gaining professional development, building local and regional networks, and obtaining opportunities to innovate ultimately contribute to better educational opportunities for students.

When asked about his experience with the League, Stan Gorbak, Assistant Superintendent of Technology Services/CTO of the Indian Prairie School District 204 in Illinois, stated, “My experience with the League continues to be a highlight of my career which encompasses over 30 years working in public education. The League is a visionary change agent, leading in the areas of innovation, collaboration, and generally making positive change. The League’s endeavors promote leadership development and generate increasingly growing networks between public and private, and nonprofit entities. Also, the

League has changed the nature of the typical discourse between educators and vendors. To have representatives from different sectors working together at the national level to make positive changes is both refreshing and exciting. Without question, the League is having a positive impact on students.”

Among the polled district leaders, 81.3 percent stated that their students have benefited from their membership in the League, as shown in Figure 3.

When asked to elaborate, district leaders provided the following testimonials:

“We have been able to bring ideas to our building. During our visits, we see many similar initiatives/frameworks that are happening in our buildings. Validation is as important as new ideas!” - Ann Linson, Superintendent of East Noble School Corporation, Kendallville, Indiana

“Our teaching and learning pedagogy has shifted to meeting the individual needs of students through a personalized learning model. This has been a direct result of our membership with the League and our work with Education Elements, [Digital

### Do you think your students have benefited from your membership in the League?

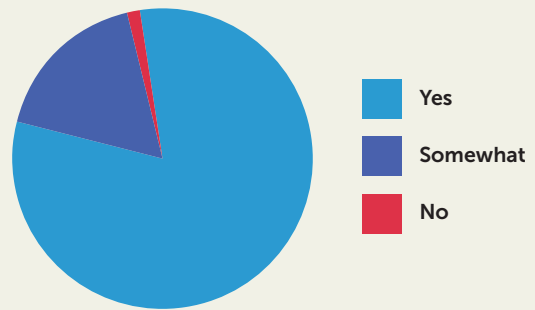


Figure 3: Survey results indicating whether district leaders believe their membership has benefited their students.

Promise’s corporate partner].” - Rick Robins, Superintendent of Juab School District, Nephi, Utah

The majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that membership has increased their ability to support their students by offering new, innovative services, programs and initiatives, including supports for their underserved students.

### Questions related to supporting students

I have increased the number of services offered to my students because of my affiliation with the League

I have increased the number of programs and initiatives for students because of my affiliation with the League

I have discovered better ways to support my underserved students because of my affiliation with the League

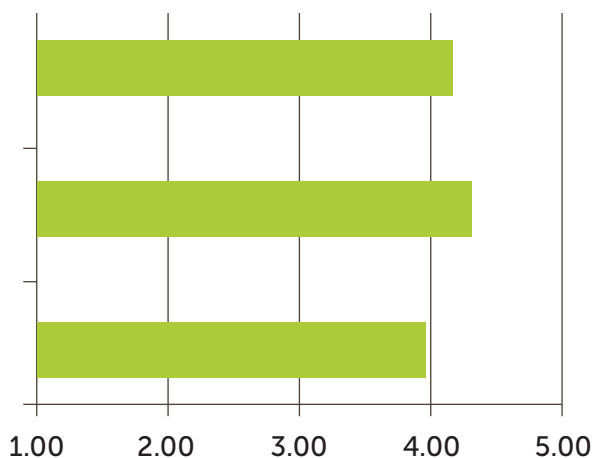


Figure 4: Survey results indicating district leaders’ improved ability to support students.

Being a part of the League has provided direct opportunities for district leaders to participate in other Digital Promise programs. Through grant funding and partnerships, Digital Promise has been able to offer the following services to some League districts:

- **Verizon Innovative Learning Schools:** 8.6 percent of League districts are part of the Verizon Innovative Learning Schools program, which provides middle school students with access to mobile learning technology in the classroom and at home, equips educators with personalized professional development, and supports all participants with a national community of practice.
- **Educator Micro-credentials:** 50 percent of districts surveyed are involved with educator micro-credentials, which provides teachers with personalized professional development and the opportunity to gain recognition for skills they develop throughout their careers, regardless of where or how they learned them.
- **Ed-Tech Research Pilots:** 16 percent of districts surveyed have participated in ed-tech pilots supporting education leaders as they use research and data to select products and programs that improve learning opportunities for their students.

- **Learning Studios:** 26 percent of League districts have received Learning Studios (supported by HP and Microsoft)—a suite of products and programming that encourages learners to define the problems they want to solve and design solutions to address them. To support participating educators, Digital Promise provides professional learning opportunities, facilitates an online learning community, and develops and curates creative learning activities and projects for students.

## Effect of longevity of League membership

Our analysis of the survey responses included investigating the effect of length of League membership on questions relating to benefits reaped from membership.

The results on the following page show that the number of years in the League network is a significant predictor of respondents' positive responses to questions about increases in a district leaders' ability to innovate (Figure 5) and the number of programs they have introduced to their students (Figure 6).

“My experience with the League continues to be a highlight of my career which encompasses over 30 years working in public education. Without question, the League is having a positive impact on students.”

- Stan Gorbatkin, Assistant Superintendent of Technology Services/CTO of the Indian Prairie School District 204



Figure 5:  
 Number of years in the League as a predictor of respondents' agreement with the statement "The League has increased my capacity to innovate" ( $F(1,72)=6.143$   $B(\text{years})=0.07$ ,  $p=0.0155$ ).

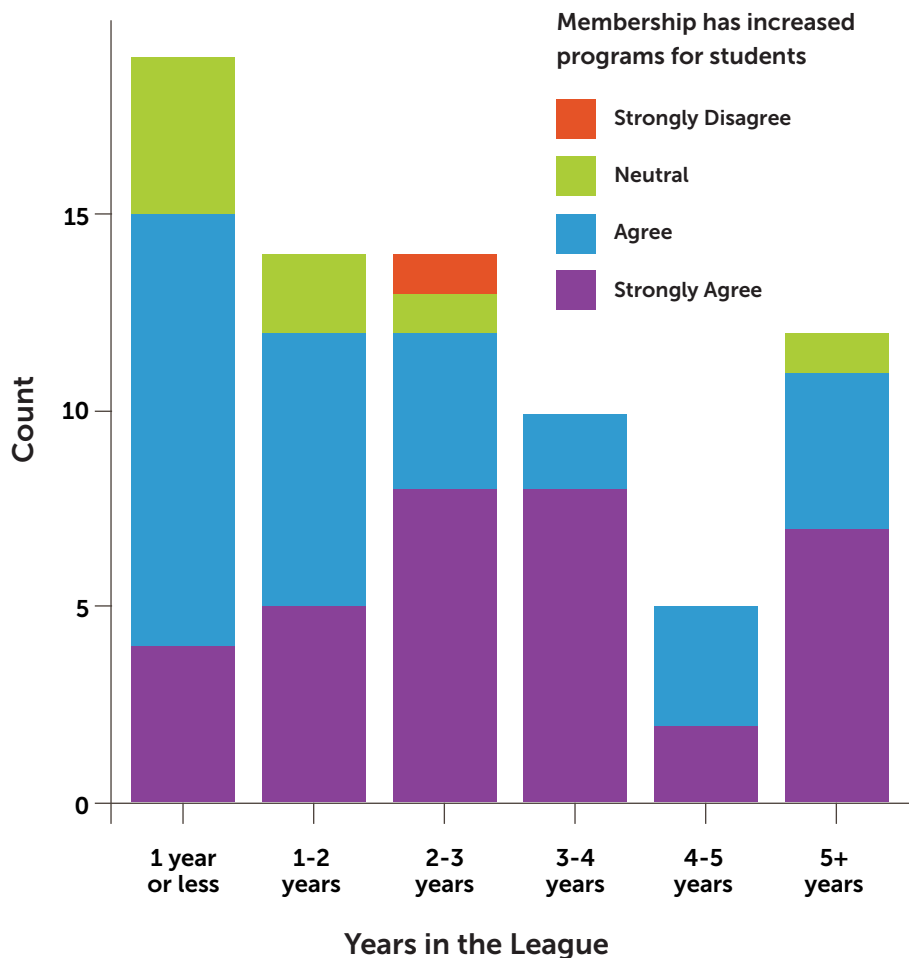


Figure 6:  
 Number of years in the League as a predictor of respondents' agreement with the statement "The League has increased district programming for students" ( $F(1,72)=5.122$   $B(\text{years})=0.11$ ,  $p=0.0266$ ).



# Limitations

Since the survey asked superintendents and district leaders to self-report on the impact League membership has had on their districts, we cannot assume a direct correlation to increased teacher empowerment, student achievement, or learning opportunities. Although it would be desirable to further explore those outcomes, this report has focused on immediate and intermediate impacts as self-reported by the superintendents and district leaders surveyed.

Future studies could measure the change in responses over time to determine if the length of membership affects overall results as we have shown in the two previous examples. Additionally, future research could focus on whether a district leader's involvement in the League has a positive effect on their teachers and students, and on student learning outcomes within their districts.

# Conclusion

Using a mixed-methods approach to measure the perceived benefits of League membership, we have shown that League participants tend to believe that membership is beneficial for them personally and for their districts. District leaders reported that membership in the League has provided professional development opportunities and strengthened their regional and national networks. They also reported that the League network has supported their ability to innovate within their districts and increased their ability to better serve their students.

Digital Promise has achieved these results by connecting and convening leaders in education, technology, and research; funding and resource-brokering; and providing research and knowledge management.

These activities have resulted in continuing availability of funding, an accessible and robust knowledge base, mechanisms that support the development of knowledge and skills, and a strong community of practice.

Finally, preliminary analysis of the effect of membership longevity indicated that districts length of membership is a predictor of perceived benefits of participation for members; future studies may uncover why this is the case and how to make the League more relevant for newer members. As the League network continues to evolve, Digital Promise will monitor the changes created by this network on district leaders' professional development and on the quality of the service they provide to their districts.

# Appendix A

The logic model below provides a general theory of change for understanding how the League acts as an innovation intermediary.

Situation	Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Impacts		
				Immediate Impacts	Intermediate Impacts	Ultimate Impacts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Technology is transforming individual classrooms, but education as a field is still slow to leverage the power of connected networks that can help pockets of local excellence scale to national success</li> <li>District leaders are trying to implement innovative programs but lack peers in their network who can provide professional support</li> </ul>	Funding for projects, convenings, and research	Convenings that bring together leaders in education, technology, and research	# of convenings that connect leaders in education, technology, and research  # of attendees at convenings	Professional growth opportunities for district leaders	Increased support for district leaders to innovate in their districts	Empowered teachers who innovate in their classrooms
	Online learning community of educators, researchers, and entrepreneurs	Study tours that provide in-depth learning experiences	Access to funding and resources  # of projects that League members collaborate on  #frequency of interaction between League members	An expanded network regionally and nationally	Increased number of innovative learning opportunities for students within League districts	Increased number of innovative school models and more innovative teaching practices in public schools
	Staff to support and facilitate network	Opportunities to participate in research projects	# of research, knowledge sharing, and management projects members participate in		More efficient and informed implementation of innovative programs	
	Communications support to highlight district stories and news	Working groups that collaborate on creating tools and sharing knowledge on various topics of interest	# of professional development opportunities for district leaders			

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