

Teacher Leadership

The importance of teacher leadership is grounded in the reality that the idea of a superhero principal single-handedly transforming an under-performing school is obsolete. The demands of school reform are far too complex for any single individual. Although school governance in many places remains very hierarchical and bureaucratic, many states, districts, and schools across the country are beginning to implement a new paradigm of school leadership: a distributive model that cultivates the resource of teacher leaders. Indeed, the need to value and harness the power of teacher leaders is even more critical in the context of instructional improvement and school turnaround. Research has often made the case that for any school reform initiative to be sustainable, teachers must be actively and deeply involved in the change. A 2008 report by the Center for Teaching Quality championed smart policy approaches that “maximize the value of teachers who have been identified as effective by allowing them to serve as agents for quality teaching for all students.” But too often, traditional top-down structures limit opportunities for teachers to effect meaningful change outside their classrooms.

One challenge of this work is that defining teacher leadership, and specifying the roles it includes, has not been a straightforward task. There is considerable variation in what people mean by the concept, how teacher leadership is implemented, and what people believe it can accomplish. There are, however, some commonalities and recurring patterns in the tasks teacher leaders take on. Teacher leaders are often engaged in activities related to:

- ★ Curriculum and/or assessment development;
- ★ Selecting instructional models and materials;
- ★ Planning and/or leading professional development activities;
- ★ Mentoring, coaching, and training other teachers;
- ★ Conducting evaluations of fellow teachers and/or administrators; and
- ★ Building-level decisionmaking, including determining school budgets.

The reasons why teachers become teacher leaders are as varied as the potential responsibilities. For some, teacher leadership is a path for career advancement and possibly to the principalship, while for others it serves as an opportunity to

strengthen school culture and professional practice and to exercise leadership without leaving the classroom. There is also a great deal of diversity in the qualifications and preparation teacher leaders possess. What is clear is that this distributive framework, which has become typical in business careers, is guided by a belief that all members of the community have knowledge and expertise that can benefit the organization’s efficacy as a whole. In this context, leadership is reframed as an embedded quality within the culture of a school instead of as a role confined to one individual. The goal of distributive leadership is therefore not simply to divide or delegate labor among more players, but to engage and empower personnel as active co-participants in school improvement.

A growing body of research and evidence supports this new idea of school leadership. The landmark report by Kenneth Leithwood, et al., *How Leadership Influences Learning*, found evidence from multiple studies that effective school leaders share responsibility and stimulate opportunities for leadership throughout their school. One leadership practice that was consistently linked to improved student learning was developing people. School leaders are no longer judged merely by management prowess. Success in the position is now marked by ability to articulate a vision for shared purpose, decentralize authority, and facilitate an organization’s focus on learning. As Education Trust president Kati Haycock has said, “Leadership is not about one person. It’s about building a shared commitment and building a leadership team.” A recent *Wallace Perspective* on principal preparation, *Preparing Principals for Today’s Schools*, explains how a “successful school leader more closely resembles an orchestra conductor than a virtuoso soloist.” This metaphor highlights the unlikelihood of a conductor succeeding independently; teacher leaders are essential players in the school orchestra.

Although there is limited empirical evidence as to the effects of teacher leadership, research on successful schools supports the concept that less hierarchical models of school leadership—models in which teacher leaders can flourish as partners and collaborators—are necessary. States’ efforts to date on identifying specific teacher leader endorsements appear most effective when they are not perceived as add-ons, but as part of a broader initiative to meet the demand for more rigorous, instructionally focused school leaders as central to school improvement. Efforts to redesign preparation and licensure of teachers and principals

requires ongoing, strategic engagement of invested local constituencies such as unions, school boards, and superintendents. Through consensus-building processes, much can be learned about the roles teacher leaders play, their impact on student achievement, and the qualifications, skills, and attributes teachers must possess in order to be successful in a leadership role. However, research and evaluation are also needed to tease out how effective teachers advance student learning within and beyond their classroom walls, how they are rewarded for their expertise, and how reconfigured leadership can further professionalize teaching.

State Considerations for Teacher Leadership

- ★ What are the implications for the state in viewing a key role of the principal as being a facilitator of shared leadership? Such a view would likely mean changes in principal licensure and evaluation standards.
- ★ Can a teacher leader endorsement serve as an accelerated path to becoming a principal? If so, this must be reflected in the expectations, mentorship, and evaluations of teacher leaders.
- ★ How can teacher leadership work as a career ladder to promote teachers who do not want to leave the classroom? Coaching and mentoring posts often allow teachers to escape the “flatness” of the profession by influencing the practice of others without sacrificing continued classroom teaching. Will the state create split time contracts, or look to teachers to voluntarily take on additional responsibilities?
- ★ What recruitment efforts and incentives are in place to ensure an adequate supply of qualified and effective teacher leaders? Collaboration between district and university partners can build a pipeline of teachers entering the profession who have collaborative leadership capacity.
- ★ Does the state have professional standards for teachers that include teacher leadership?
- ★ What systems are in place at the state level to recognize teacher leaders for their contributions and accomplishments? Research suggests that including leadership as a component of teachers’ roles heightens their sense of ownership in the school mission. Does the state compensation scale factor in teacher leadership roles?

State Actions

The Ohio Leadership Advisory Council created a leadership development framework that stresses a team-based approach to school leadership. The framework calls for “building leadership teams” (BLTs) that utilize shared leadership structures and

posits that “high-performing BLTs also provide greater opportunities for teacher leadership inside and outside of the classroom.” Ohio has also explicitly included teacher leadership as part of the state’s professional standards for educators.

Alabama, Delaware, Kansas, Kentucky, and Ohio and Joe Murphy from Vanderbilt University’s Peabody College are working collaboratively to develop a comprehensive 14-course university curriculum for teacher leaders anticipated for release in early 2009. Teacher modules are clearly designed for state teacher certification programs as well as for adding teacher leader endorsements to existing certification. The curriculum will focus on developing an understanding of the whole school, working productively with others, deepening the instructional capacity of colleagues, and leading school improvement.

Georgia, Illinois, and Louisiana all offer optional teacher leader endorsements as part of their teacher certification system and alongside features such as robust internships, collaborative partnerships, coherent curricula, and purposeful recruitment being used to strengthen principal preparation. The endorsements are performance-based and recognize teacher expertise. Typically, building roles do not require the endorsement, nor does the endorsement mandate a pay raise. The endorsements provide an optional career pathway into full school leader certification.

Kentucky is currently redesigning principal preparation programs with well-defined criteria in tandem with teacher leadership programs. The state is leveraging current requirements that all teachers receive a master’s degree in ten years by redesigning the master’s degree programs to elevate all teachers as leaders in the classroom, school, and district. The Kentucky Teacher Internship Program and New Teacher Standards were revised in 2002 with the addition of the leadership standard for new teachers.

Maryland and Massachusetts have partnered with unions to expand the roles of teacher leaders. In Montgomery County, Maryland, a former teachers’ union president led the creation of contracts with expanded leadership roles for teachers in professional and curriculum development as well as in peer review. Unions also supported Springfield, Massachusetts’ adoption of a teacher leader position contract compensated with higher pay than traditional teacher salaries.

Resources

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