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FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

DISTRICTS HARNESS POWER AND EXPERTISE OF THE CLASSROOM TEACHER


By Valerie von Frank

In the early part of the decade, Springfield (Mass.) Education Association President Tim Collins was negotiating the teachers' contract in what he described as a challenging environment. Teachers had gone years without a contract or salary increase and politicians were pressuring the district to enact performance-based merit pay, he said. Teachers, he said, were fleeing to surrounding districts.

"There was a real brain drain, a talent drain," Collins said.

When the contract was settled in 2006, the atmosphere — and the provisions — were strikingly different. Collaboration began to change the culture. Rather than rewarding individual teachers for students' performance in a single year, a move Collins said fails to recognize the effect of all teachers within the school on a child's academic career, the contract recognized teachers' expertise with a new career ladder. Without having to leave teaching for administration, Springfield teachers now can be designated as teacher leaders or instructional specialists. In these nonevaluative roles, they earn more than in a regular teaching position and lead colleagues in improving instruction.

School leadership isn't just for principals anymore. Research is bearing out that principals who share leadership create stronger school cultures and improve teaching and learning (Copland, 2003; Lord & Miller, 2000). Rather than the principal as the sole person responsible for the increasing number of aspects of work in a school, the principal is becoming leader of an



Principals who tap the power and expertise of teachers create stronger school cultures and improve teaching and learning.

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NSDC's purpose: Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.

instructional leadership cadre (Portin, et al., 2003). Kenneth Leithwood, in *How Leadership Influences Learning*, found evidence from multiple studies that successful school leaders share responsibility and create opportunities for leadership throughout their school. A Wallace Foundation Perspective on principal preparation, *Becoming a Leader: Preparing Principals for Today's Schools*, states that a “successful school leader more closely resembles an orchestra conductor than a virtuoso soloist.”

The role of teachers as leaders

The concept of shared leadership is more than giving teachers authority over whether the lunchroom should have soda machines or students should be allowed a Halloween parade. Although some teachers in the past had leadership roles as department heads or specialists, the new paradigm does not involve management. Teachers are sharing in school improvement decisions, along with principals. A forthcoming report by Bradley S. Portin and a team of researchers from the University of Washington finds distributed leadership often involves not only a role with the school leadership team, but decision making roles on other learning teams, focusing on curriculum, instruction, or leading professional learning. In the districts Portin and his co-authors study, teacher leaders are part of schoolwide instructional leadership teams developing strategies for improving teaching and learning; do the bulk of professional development work, spend time with individuals, small groups, and sometimes the whole faculty to boost instructional capacity; are focused on relationships and communicating improvement to teachers; and connect with teachers using data. By remaining nonevaluative, teacher leaders retain greater credibility, according to the study, commissioned by The Wallace Foundation.

The benefits of teachers as leaders also have been made clear. Leadership roles for teachers, according to Joseph Murphy (2005):

- Foster collegiality;
 - Lessen attrition;
 - Increase capacity by attracting bright newcomers;
 - And, most importantly, promote change at the classroom and school levels.
- Leadership roles enhance teachers’ feelings of

professionalism and student academic performance, according to some research. Ladson-Billings (1999) and Dilworth and Imig (1995) find that when teachers design and implement professional development, rather than having learning created for them, teachers feel more valued and are more willing to adopt new pedagogical techniques.

States and districts recognize teachers’ expertise

While many states, districts, and schools continue to have a top-down model, others have given up the hierarchy and are harnessing the expertise of classroom teachers. Teachers are becoming active participants in leadership roles:

- The Ohio Leadership Advisory Council’s leadership development framework creates building leadership teams that share leadership among school staff members, allowing for teacher leadership outside the classroom. The state’s professional standards for educators also include teacher leadership.
- With support from The Wallace Foundation, Delaware worked with a consortium of states including Alabama, Kansas, Kentucky, and Ohio to develop a model teacher leadership curriculum that allows teachers to add a teacher leader endorsement to their certification. Skills include broadening one’s understanding of the school as a whole, working collegially, deepening the instructional capacity of colleagues, and leading school improvement.
- Georgia, Illinois, and Louisiana offer performance-based teacher leader endorsements, but without a requirement for differentiated pay. The endorsements more typically are a path to school leader certification.
- Kentucky added leadership standards for new teachers in 2002. All teachers are required to earn a master’s degree.
- Maryland and Massachusetts have partnered with education associations to expand the roles of teacher leaders. Montgomery County, Maryland, expanded teachers’ leadership role

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NSDC’S BELIEF

Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.

to professional learning and curriculum development.

Springfield's career ladder

In Springfield, Collins said the career ladder is helping to retain talented teachers in the district, as well as helping teachers become recognized for their knowledge as teacher leaders identify their colleagues' areas of expertise to share with others. The job-embedded nature of the work as teachers coach colleagues and model instruction techniques syncs with what is known about best practices for professional learning, according to a Stanford team of researchers led by Linda Darling-Hammond (Wei, et al., 2009).

The contract created two new designations for teachers: teacher leader and instructional leadership specialist. Teachers apply for the positions, submitting a portfolio and interviewing for the select designations. They receive two-year appointments, then must be reappointed.

Only the most experienced teachers are eligible for the elite positions. They must have master's degrees, seven years of experience, and a 97% personal attendance rate. In addition, they must demonstrate that their students achieved more than one year's growth in achievement on the district's value-added model. They must be willing to be placed where the district perceives a need.

The benefits can be considerable. Teacher leaders earn 4% and instructional leadership specialists get an additional 7% beyond their regular salaries. The additional money can put them thousands above what they could earn at the top of the regular teacher scale.

Teacher leaders mentor colleagues, and the instructional leadership specialists work with other teachers, modeling, sharing best practices, working with data, and designing professional learning.

The specialists continue their own learning with one day each month devoted to topics from effective classroom management to content areas to pedagogy. They also hone their skills in working with adult learners, in how to model and mentor colleagues. "We need to give them as much help and support as possible," Collins said. "Schools really rely on them, so they need to be up to speed."

Approximately 100 instructional leaders were

hired beginning in 2006-07 after portfolio reviews and interviews. Teacher leaders positions were filled in 2007-08.

Collins warns that the positions can be powerful, but also can shut down communication in a building when those in the roles are asked to become an extension of the administration and take on the perception that they are supervising, evaluating, or even reporting details to the principal.

"People will not share their weaknesses (with a teacher leader or instructional specialist) unless they are confident it is not going to hurt them," he said. "There's a lot that can be learned if someone is lucky enough to be in a school where people share. Working collaboratively increases the chances of growing, becoming an excellent teacher. That's at the heart of this possibility.

"The concept of a career ladder for teachers, if done appropriately and not used as supplementary administrative staff, is exceptional," he continued. "It's about growing our own and growing together.

"Teachers need to be the architects (of reform); top-down reform never works. You have to create an atmosphere where there's honest, open conversation about what's happening, and then a whole culture develops that makes the difference."

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IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER LEADERS' LEARNING

What teacher leaders need to know — like their role — is still evolving, according to Bradley S. Portin and his co-authors. However, the researchers conclude in a forthcoming report from The Wallace Foundation that teacher leaders need:

- Strong content knowledge, but also to be able to identify areas of need by analyzing data and linking decisions to these data;
- To support colleagues in a nonsupervisory role, helping them to open classroom doors and to understand best practices through demonstrations;
- To learn to navigate a new relationship with colleagues and develop others' trust in their expertise;
- Excellent communication skills to translate district and school reform messages appropriately to teachers.

While many states, districts, and schools continue to have a top-down model, others have given up the hierarchy and are harnessing the expertise of classroom teachers.

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