

Leaders come from all corners

When the phrase school leader is used, most people think about principals or assistant principals. Yet schools are filled with teacher leaders, as well. These teacher leaders are responsible for guiding instructional improvement to increase student learning. Over the years, researchers have explored what it takes to become a teacher leader and what teacher leaders do, yet most teacher leaders enter their roles as volunteers with little or no preparation. In many cases, they become successful leaders by emulating leaders they have known and appreciated and depend on what they have learned as leaders of their classrooms.

Skillful teacher leaders who influence change within their schools and their colleagues lead with attitude, focus, and commitment. Teacher leaders emerge from many corners of the school. The school media specialist who organizes a schoolwide research initiative to explore the impact of global warming on Earth's climate is a teacher leader. So, too, is the ESL teacher who hosts her students' parents for a family introduction to school and the school's curriculum and helps parents learn about resources available for families in the community. Teachers who serve as grade-level, department, or team chairs are leaders — responsible for engaging teachers in curriculum alignment, examining student work, and screening curriculum resources to ensure they complement adopted curriculum standards.

Some district leaders and principals understand the significant contribution teacher leaders make to improving school culture, teaching, and student learning. In those schools, teacher leaders have opportunities to develop leadership competencies, some of which they developed over their career, such as those associated with curriculum, assessment, and instruction. However, some com-

petencies teacher leaders need are not common to classroom instruction. Teacher leaders develop those areas of expertise through practice or through professional learning that focuses on teacher leadership.

In their analysis of leadership for transforming high schools, Michael Copland and Elizabeth Boatright (2006, p. 11) identified five areas of



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NSDC STANDARD

Leadership: Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous instructional improvement.



focus for school leaders that align with other research studies on leadership. Those areas include:

1. **Focus on learning.** Leaders' ability to promote a clear and consistent focus on learning for all high school students and professionals is a central part of their work.
2. **Use of data and evidence.** Leaders continuously use data and evidence in service of instructional improvement and as a basic element of decision making related to instructional improvement in the high school.

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3. **Aligning resources with learning improvement goals.** Leaders reallocate resources and create incentives that serve the specific instructional improvement goals that each high school sets out for itself, across differing school district contexts.
4. **Construction of roles that enable leaders to focus on learning improvement.** The redefinition of leadership roles and authority relationships enable leaders (construed broadly) to impact teaching and learning in high schools.
5. **Engagement with the community.** Leaders emphasize engaging community constituents, parents, and support providers in ways that promote the learning agenda.

These areas of focus require those in leadership roles, including teachers, to hone a set of skills based on a body of knowledge and embedded in healthy attitudes about productive leadership. Some district leaders realize the importance of providing opportunities for developing teacher leaders who will influence school improvement and have designed appropriate programs. Some principals work closely with teacher leaders, coaching them. Others teacher leaders learn on the job through trial-and-error. Knowledge and skill areas such as adult development, individual and organizational change, facilitation, and communication are often included as core content in teacher leadership programs. What is frequently missing is attention to the attitudes or dispositions for successful leadership. Three, in particular, are important to consider.

Efficacy: Teacher leaders have a strong belief in their own efficacy. They know they make a difference; seek the learning that will help them improve continuously; feel confident in their actions; have a strong sense of empowerment to take action; and believe others share their sense of self-efficacy. Strong efficacy prevents blaming and fault finding, encourages action even in the face of adversity, and ensures commitment to overcoming barriers.

Collective responsibility: Closely related to efficacy is a strong sense of collective responsibility. Teacher leaders recognize that no one person is capable of transforming schools. They believe every adult within a school has a role and responsibility to ensure student success. They work collaboratively with their peers to set short- and long-terms

goals, define specific actions to accomplish those goals, engage in learning to expand and refine their practice, and evaluate the impact of their work on student learning.

Equity: Teacher leaders are committed to success for all students and adults. They recognize that success depends on the success of each learner within a school and work to identify and overcome practices that include inherent bias, preferential treatment, unfair practices, and inadequate opportunities for the learning. Teacher leaders actively pursue ways to develop and support classroom, school, and community interventions that address underserved students, and they hold a deep belief that the nation's future depends on a well-educated citizenry.

Attitudes, what people believe, are more challenging to develop in leaders than knowledge and skills. Successful leaders demonstrate strong alignment between what they say and do. This alignment is based on a mental model in which one has integrity and clarity about his or her dispositions. In order to understand one's beliefs and to refine them, it is important to examine practice, receive feedback, reflect on the alignment between one's actions and espoused beliefs, and engage in dialogue. Teacher leaders, as other leaders, often have limited opportunities for this form of learning and engagement with others, yet teacher leaders can influence the content of conversations to focus on beliefs associated with actions.

What Copland and Boatright assert in their discussion of high school leadership makes it clear that the effects of leadership are measured on one criterion. Their comment (p. 11) applies to all schools: "The outcomes of leaders' efforts to improve high schools," they state, "must be judged on the basis of tangible evidence of learning — learning by students and professionals and for the school as an organization. Absent this, not much else matters."

Reference

Copland, M. & Boatright, E. (2006, December). *Leadership for transforming high schools*. Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington. Available at www.wallacefoundation.org/wallace/6LeadershipforTransformingHighSchools.pdf. ◆

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