



## New standards for teacher leaders: How would they look in practice?

**R**ecently developed model standards for teacher leaders establish clear criteria for teachers who want to advance as professional educators without leaving teaching or their schools (see article on p. 1). The standards strive to build consistency without being prescriptive. They confirm the importance of teacher leadership and define common expectations for those who become teacher leaders. Ministries or departments of education may use the standards as a guide to develop their own standards. Schools and school systems may establish different criteria for various leadership roles since the responsibilities of teacher leaders vary based on the specific leadership role.

The teacher leadership standards have the potential to professionalize teaching and improve both teaching and student learning, but they also raise questions.

### Some or all?

A fundamental question is which teachers are teacher leaders and will they be expected to meet the model teacher leadership standards. Some education leaders hold the expectation that all teachers are teacher leaders. Others consider teacher leaders to be a subset of all teachers that includes only those who aspire to a leadership role and who choose to accept additional responsibilities beyond their classroom teaching roles.

Those who hold the expectation that all teachers become teacher

leaders operate from the perspective that all teachers have the responsibility to demonstrate the ability to lead and to contribute to the education profession beyond their individual classrooms. In this case, all teachers are accountable not only for being an effective classroom teacher, but also for contributing in other ways. Because what it means to be a teacher leader differs from system to system, the standards provide examples of what some of those leadership responsibilities might be. Some roles may require the skillfulness to facilitate meetings of peers. Some teacher leaders may need the ability to serve as a spokesperson for the school or the school system. Other leaders may serve as mentors to novice teachers. Leadership may also mean influencing policy about education or contributing to the direction of the school's improvement plan and supporting the implementation of that plan. Leadership may mean participating as a member of a learning community and contributing to collaborative work and learning within a team of peers.

The latter stance, that only some teachers are teacher leaders, is more broadly accepted. The designation of teacher leader is reserved for teachers who

have both more experience and a level of expertise as a professional educator not typical in novice teachers. This perspective of teacher leadership acknowledges that one grows into a leadership role through a wide range of experience and formal and informal professional development. In this perspective, teacher leadership is a point along the career continuum of teachers. Teacher-leader competencies and responsibilities relate to contributions teachers make to school improvement and student achievement outside their own classrooms.

Typical teacher-leader responsibilities include facilitating professional learning communities, leading school-based committees, serving as department, team, or grade-level

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chairs, providing coaching, mentoring novice teachers, or serving on district curriculum task forces.

### **Preparing leaders**

Determining which teachers become teacher leaders has multiple practical implications. Some of these implications involve preparation and opportunity for leadership roles. If all teachers are expected to be teacher leaders, will the responsibility for preparing teachers to be teacher leaders fall to those who prepare teacher candidates or will schools systems or individual teachers share responsibility for developing teacher leaders? Both traditional and alternative

teacher preparation programs focus on preparing candidates for the core practices of teaching. Those who prepare teachers may be called upon to reconfigure how they define the core competencies of teachers, how they structure learning experiences

and practice opportunities for teacher candidates, and how they define exit expectations. Licensing agencies may need to alter current criteria and add additional assessments or portfolio requirements to ensure that those licensed to teach demonstrate leadership competencies.

Systems and preparation programs will also need to determine when during a teacher's career leadership competencies are developed. Will teachers' preparatory programs focus

on teacher leadership, or will teachers first develop fundamental teaching skills and focus on developing leadership skills when they are more experienced? If the decision is to postpone development of these competencies, who will provide opportunities for developing these skills? Options include universities and colleges, school systems, or other providers. Teachers may additionally require professional development, formal courses of study, or advanced degrees to gain expertise in teacher leadership.

### **Opportunities to lead**


Another major consideration is the number of opportunities for teachers to engage in authentic leadership practices. Preparing teachers for leadership and then affording them insufficient opportunities for authentic leadership wastes the potential created. If teachers are expected to acquire leadership competencies and yet have no opportunity to use and refine those skills in their work, those competencies will quickly weaken and their acquisition becomes pointless. And, if the opportunities to engage in leadership are not authentic, professionally rewarding, challenging, coordinated, and supported, teacher leadership will be trivialized. Many schools and school systems currently have insufficient opportunities for teachers to engage in authentic leadership roles.

With opportunities for leadership are parallel needs for ongoing professional development, supervision, and support of teachers engaged in leadership roles. When a teacher assumes a designated leadership role, someone will need to provide the appropriate level of coaching and supervision to

allow the teacher to develop leadership competencies. The logical person to assume this responsibility this is the school principal or someone in central office. Expecting teachers to practice leadership without appropriate preparation, ongoing professional development, support, and supervision is not only an unacceptable personnel practice; it also opens the door to other more significant challenges.

For example, will school systems and licensing agencies require all teachers in leadership positions to have appropriate credentials and preparation, and demonstrate they meet the standards? Will some roles, such as that of a coach, require teachers to meet the teacher leader standards while other roles will not require the same? This question has potential for affecting the success and quality of teacher leaders.

Until now, teacher leaders have emerged from opportunities or their own desire to assume leadership, often with little formal preparation. Some teachers have completed advanced degrees in education administration with plans to move into principalships, yet upon further thought decided to remain in classrooms. Once leaders in the field have examined the challenges and issues involved, teacher leader standards will professionalize these opportunities for influence and, ultimately, help improve teaching and student learning.

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