



Encourage teachers to step up to leadership roles

When The Wallace Foundation released a study on successful school leadership practices (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010), I noted particularly one insight from the research: These leaders did not act alone. The most effective principals shared leadership in very deliberate ways to ensure high levels of student learning. They counted on teacher leaders to assist them in clarifying their vision and leading their colleagues to achieve it.

While this realization seems obvious to some, to others it is new and startling. Some principals are not prepared in a way that helps them to create a vision for shared leadership. At the same time, some teachers are reluctant to consider their roles and responsibilities as school leaders. Schools will benefit when we can find ways to change both views.

A few years ago, we offered a session at our summer conference featuring elected and appointed leaders in professional associations. Panel members were invited to reflect on what they learned about leading that they wanted to pass on to others in the room.

I was surprised by a common element in the leadership stories of many panel members, as well as session attendees who shared their own experiences. Most of these highly

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successful educators had not considered themselves leaders or offered their services until after their first experience with a formal leadership assignment or recognition of their potential. I was shocked to learn that while 100% of the session attendees came to classify themselves as leaders, more than 75% of them had not sought a leadership position or considered a leadership path until they were invited.

I have struggled to understand this perspective. And this year I saw it unfold with my daughter, a 3rd-grade teacher in the Richardson Independent School District. With the many ways she has tried to influence her school, I always assumed she would label herself a teacher leader. It never occurred to me she didn't see herself this way until I received an email from her one day. She forwarded correspondence between her and her principal, when she was asked to work with teachers in another grade level on math curriculum planning. At the bottom of the memo she wrote, "Hee-hee — I'm a teacher leader." She had not recognized all the actions she had taken to advance her professional learning community as leadership until she was asked to specifically take a leadership role by her principal. In my view, she is a teacher leader. I saw her acts as those of a leader, even though I realized later that she didn't share my view.

These experiences have taught me

not to assume that the individuals with the passion and capacity to serve as leaders are making themselves known to us. Rather, we need to look around and be deliberate about inviting teachers to serve in leadership roles. School systems can design teacher leader academies, and principals can make sure to regularly identify teachers to participate. Everyone can take time to listen to

colleagues' aspirations and make sure they are given the encouragement to step up and lead. Leadership is needed in many forms, from formal committee assignments to short-term task forces, from formal positional responsibilities to informal support as needed.

Few schools are successful with one leader. The most successful are places where everyone shares responsibility for the success of all students and steps up to lead when they have expertise to offer or a point of view they know they must share. In all cases, teacher leaders are key to the results we seek.

REFERENCE

Louis, K.S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K.L., & Anderson, S.E. (2010). *Learning from leadership: Investigating the links to improved student learning.* St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota & University of Toronto. ■

