A LADDER *to* LEADERSHIP

OHIO STEPS UP TO STRENGTHEN TEACHERS' COLLABORATION AND COACHING SKILLS

By JoAnn Hohenbrink, Marlissa Stauffer, Ted Zigler, and Angela Uhlenhake

The move toward teacher leadership is one answer to the dilemma of school leadership. The task of school leadership has become too complex and demanding for one person. Nurturing teacher leaders helps districts strengthen school leadership, aids in teacher retention, and sustains school reform. This need for more teacher involvement in leadership led to the creation of a five-state consortium (Kentucky, Kansas, Alabama, Delaware, and Ohio) facilitated by Joseph Murphy of Vanderbilt University to explore, define, and develop courses to prepare teacher leaders. With Ohio's new teacher career lattice that includes teacher leader as one of the top tiers, teacher leadership is in the spotlight at district and state levels.

RATIONALE FOR A TEACHER LEADER ENDORSEMENT

A four-year teacher residency program, available to candidates who graduate from an accredited teacher preparation program, provides Ohio's new teachers with the coaching, mentoring, and guidance that are critical for long and successful careers as educators. Teacher leaders play a vital role in supporting beginning teachers during their residency program. The new teacher leader endorsement will facilitate support of the teacher residency program by preparing educators to serve as teacher leaders. These leaders will gain skills in working with adult learners, facilitat-

ing and leading change, managing conflict, and coaching and mentoring teachers at all stages in their careers. Additionally, teacher leaders will assist principals in developing and supporting a shared vision and clear goals for schools and provide staff development, mentoring, and coaching to teachers.

With the support of the Ohio Department of Education and The Wallace Foundation, educators at Ohio Dominican University in Columbus, Ohio, instituted a pilot program for a teacher leader endorsement. The five-state consortium and the Ohio writing teams designed a three-course program of nine semester hours. While some states in the consortium are considering a new license in teacher leadership, others are exploring a teacher leader endorsement that complements an existing teacher license.

In developing the pilot, our research focused on three specific areas not typically covered in teacher preparation programs: knowledge and understanding of leadership; understanding collaboration and working in groups for the purpose of teacher and/or school development; and understanding coaching and mentoring for improved results (see brief course descriptions in box at right).

LEARNING FROM STUDENT REFLECTIONS

Each participant wrote a final reflection about the three courses, noting what had an impact, what worked, and what needed to be changed. The course participants were not new to teacher leadership. About 75% of the cohort were in a Teacher Advancement Program in a large urban school system (Columbus City Schools) and had previous training in coaching and mentoring.

Many participants wrote about the importance of the first course on leadership. They found that the readings, discussions, and self-assessments to understand their own leadership styles had a great impact on their teaching and leadership. Researchers were surprised that this information was new to teachers in leadership positions in their schools and the district. We understand now that teacher preparation programs and districts aren't teaching teachers how to work in leadership roles, while they spend lots of time and money training them how to coach and mentor (Uhlenhake, 2010).

The self-inventories had a particular value to the learners. The inventories included the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, the DISC self-inventory of leadership styles, and a rough form of leadership identification similar to the Myers-Briggs personality inventory. In discussions, students explored what they were learning about themselves and how to build on what they learned through these assessments.

Almost every participant (20 of 23) wrote about the

COURSES FOR THE TEACHER LEADER ENDORSEMENT

Course 1
Developing a Deeper Understanding of Leadership

Teacher leaders will examine their own leadership styles and beliefs while learning more about leadership in general and school leadership specifically. A goal is to increase teachers' leadership skills and knowledge so as individuals and teams, they help develop solutions to real-world issues in schools.

Course 2
Collaboration: Leading and Facilitating Teacher Development

Teachers leaders will analyze and practice how to effectively collaborate. This course covers facilitation skills, consensus building, team-building strategies, and problem-solving skills that work in school settings. As their culminating projects, participants lead a school team or group to experience and understand the development of that group with the support of the instructional team.

Course 3
Coaching and Mentoring for Improved Results

This course focuses on developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for teacher leaders to provide high levels of effective coaching and mentoring with the intention of improving classroom practices and learning for all students. For their final projects, participants mentor and coach teachers in their districts in a safe practice environment within guidelines of the district.

importance of small- and large-group discussions. Working in collaboration was invaluable to the students to understand groups and group dynamics as well as build relationships. Thus, the cohort model was key to their learning, mutual support, and growth. They learned much from each other and from students in another district.

Considering the course structure, students initially wondered why each class started with a warm-up activity. They soon understood this helped build relationships, allowed everyone to speak right away, and released some of the worries of the school day to prepare for getting to work. It became a favorite group activity.

Every student but one wrote about his or her personal growth, and even the exception wrote of the great confirmation she felt as a result of the coursework. The reflections indicated that the courses help students feel confident about their thoughts and methods. They understood they were already doing a lot right in working with their fellow teachers. Others wrote of overcoming fears — fears of speaking to groups or leading peers in meetings — or of overcoming isolation and resistance that many felt once they were identified in their buildings as teacher leaders.

They also wrote about the value of learning how to listen, lead groups, work in teams, and share leadership. They noted that adult learning theory was another important new area of knowledge for them. They understood that working with adults requires a different set of pedagogical skills than what they use with K-12 students.

Comments ranged from, "Wow, have I been waiting for this!" to "I have grown in unfathomable ways; this reflection can't scratch the surface," and "I have never gotten more out of class." Another said: "The biggest change I've experienced as a result of going through the teacher leader endorsement process is my level of confidence in my job." It was obvious the members of the cohort learned from each other: "Thank you for allowing me to take part in this collegial meeting of the minds every week."

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOLS

The authors believe that the leadership teachers are exploring in these courses is essential for their success, and this type of leadership isn't identical to principal leadership. The isolation teacher leaders feel when they begin to lead their colleagues is profound. Because they lack positional power, it is important for teacher leaders to lead by example, by helping others, through the use of collaboration, and by using every tool available to them. We posit that this may be a pure form of leadership using a kind of "expert power." Such teachers must lead from ideas and by example, by being the best at something, and through simply helping their colleagues succeed.

Through this pilot project, we heard about so many roles that teacher leaders need to play. We believe that it is essential that we not try to codify all teacher leader roles into formal, paid positions or even informal positions. Flexibility in roles and relationships will maximize teacher leaders in every building. Ohio has 614 school districts, and the concept of teacher leadership must apply to all and flex to meet the needs of all districts.

> For the sake of sustainability of school reform movements in schools, we must develop teacher leaders to stand beside principals, working hand-in-hand to make positive change in schools.

LESSONS LEARNED

As instructors and participants in this research project, we found several elements of the pilot essential to personal growth and development of students in leadership, including cohort-based programs, inventories for self-understanding, field-based projects, a team of instructors to model skills, learners working in groups, simulations, and an emphasis on reflection. Instructors should span teacher education and educational leadership (which is usually about just preparing principals) and include someone from the school district for a real-world perspective on the relevance and practicality of the curriculum.

Teacher leader candidates in the courses were clear about the need for support from administrators. No amount of professional learning can overcome a principal who does not want to share leadership. The district office must create an environment conducive to teacher leaders and shared leadership and encourage principals to work alongside teacher leaders to create and sustain change.

We realized the importance of giving teachers the opportunity to practice the leadership skills they were learning. Mintzberg (2004) writes that the optimal situation for learning management skills is to take coursework while in a leadership position. In the teacher leadership courses, the culminating project was actual work in the field with teachers. While such practice can be scary, in this context it came with the support of the instructors and cohort members.

Andrews and Crowther (2006) talk of parallel leadership, which is a "particular relatedness between teacher leaders and administrator leaders" that "leads to strengthened alignment between the school's vision and the school's teaching and learning practices" (p. 536). Strong organizations have good leaders, with the necessary skills and tools, at all levels (Bennis, 1994). These sources strongly suggest new teacher leaders take their place alongside good principals.

The era of a single leader in a school or district is over — one person cannot do the enormous task required. For the sake of sustainability of school reform movements in schools, we must develop teacher leaders to stand beside principals, working hand-in-hand to make positive change in schools. When any one person in positional authority leaves, the network of teacher leaders can maintain the positive change achieved in schools.

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