



# *The* **POWER** *of 2*

**PARTNERSHIP PAVES  
THE WAY FOR TEACHER  
LEADERSHIP ACADEMY**

**By Jeanne Harmon, Kip Herren, Rod Luke, and Terese Emry**

**A** clear vision is the essential foundation for making decisions about precious resources for implementing professional learning: people, time, and money. The Auburn School District in Washington state learned firsthand how a clear vision drives resource allocation to support strategic actions and how effective partnerships can be the best solution when internal resources are not available. In collaboration with the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession, Auburn aims to impact student learning by developing teachers' instructional leadership skills. After just one year of a new initiative, 50 teacher leaders are transforming teacher and student learning through professional learning communities as well as transforming district culture.

## **VISION DRIVES ACTION**

In 2009, a committee that included district office leaders, teachers, principals, parents, and community members completed a district strategic improvement plan, which was then approved by the Auburn School District board of directors. This three-year framework guides allocation of district resources toward strategies that will help the district meet its top priority: student academic achievement. The plan details four main goals, the objectives and strategies used to meet those goals, and evidence to collect along the way. See the goals listed in the box on p. 29.

One strategy in the plan is to implement professional learning communities to give teachers time to collaborate to improve practice. Another strategy is to build leadership skills across the district. District superintendent Kip Herren saw how these strategies could work together: Build-



ing teachers' instructional leadership skills would empower them to positively influence colleagues' teaching practice through professional learning communities, while at the same time distributing leadership across the district.

#### PEOPLE AND PARTNERSHIPS

Herren realized that the district did not yet have the internal capacity to develop teacher instructional leadership skills, so he sought an outside resource. At a conference session presented by the nonprofit organization the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession, Herren discovered the resource that would link the strategies of the district strategic plan together: the teacher leadership skills framework, which outlines the knowledge, skills, and dispositions teacher leaders need in a variety of formal and informal leadership roles. The list at right shows the key skill areas for teacher leaders. Herren recognized that the center's staff had the knowledge and experience Auburn needed to create high-quality leadership training for teach-

#### STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS

##### Goal 1: Student achievement.

With district support, leadership, and guidance, each student will achieve proficiency in the Washington Comprehensive Assessment Program, and all schools will meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) by meeting or exceeding the Washington state uniform bar in reading and mathematics in grades 3 through 8 and 10.

##### Goal 2: Dropout rate and on-time graduation.

Schools will reduce dropout rates and meet additional AYP indicators as determined by K-8 attendance and high school on-time graduation rates.

##### Goal 3: Parents/guardians and community partnerships.

The district and schools will continue to develop partnerships to support student academic achievement and success.

##### Goal 4: Policies and resource management.

The district will focus on improving student academic achievement and narrowing the achievement gaps in its policy decisions and resource allocation.

ers. Herren consulted with the center's Executive Director Jeanne Harmon and Associate Director Terese Emry, and the Auburn Teacher Leadership Academy was born.

Fifty teacher leaders from across the district were selected to be part of the first academy cohort. To ensure that teacher leaders had school-based partners with whom to collaborate as they developed and exercised their leadership, two teacher leaders from each elementary school and three from each secondary school participated.

#### TIME IS ESSENTIAL

Learning Forward's research-based definition for high-quality professional learning calls for a comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach. With this definition in mind, Auburn and leaders from the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession knew that ample time for learning

#### TEACHER LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK SKILL AREAS

- Working with adult learners.
- Communication.
- Collaborative work.
- Knowledge of content and pedagogy.
- Systems thinking.

was an essential resource. Additionally, the professional learning experience needed to be meaningful and customized to meet teacher leaders' needs. Before planning began in earnest, teacher leaders completed a self-assessment based on the teacher leadership skills framework, then the center used the results to design academy content.

A four-day summer institute kicked off the academy. On the first day, academy participants grappled with what it means to be a teacher leader and what formal and informal leadership roles they might assume in their own settings. They worked through case studies describing common dilemmas of teacher leaders. For days two and three, the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession tailored academy content to meet the leadership skill needs that emerged from the self-assessment. For example, only 25% of teacher leaders reported that they had the necessary communication skills to consistently lead data-driven dialogue that facilitates informed decisions and appropriate actions. With that in mind, the center designed one full-day session devoted to learning and practicing data protocols

that academy teachers could take back to their schools and professional learning communities. A concurrent session focused on working with adult learners, another need that emerged from the self-assessment. Offering two sessions each day allowed academy participants a choice in what they needed to learn. Other sessions focused on facilitation skills, systems thinking, and effective learning community implementation. Activities that helped build a sense of community among

teacher leaders were woven throughout all institute sessions so that the teacher leaders left on day four knowing they had collegial support as they took their new skills back to their school settings.

After the school year began, the teacher leaders were released from their classrooms once a month for full-day academy sessions. The teacher leaders deepened their leadership skills and shared successes, ideas, and challenges with their academy colleagues. Similar to the summer institute, the monthly sessions were designed to be responsive to teacher leaders' emerging needs in real time. Rather than lay out the entire year's schedule in advance, Auburn and center leaders met monthly

to plan sessions based on teacher leader feedback as well as on needs that surfaced in learning communities across the district.

### FINDING FUNDS

The district needed financial resources to secure people and time to bring the Auburn Teacher Leadership Academy to fruition. The academy was established during the state and national economic downturn, when many districts were postponing or scrapping new initiatives. Given the clear vision of how the academy fit into the larger strategic plan, Auburn leaders did not let money become a barrier. Assistant Superintendent Rod Luke looked at the district's monetary resources and asked how each one might connect with the academy's goals and intent. Identifying a combination of local professional development dollars and local, county, state, and federal grant funds, Luke carved out the funds necessary to pay for services from the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession, presenter fees, stipend pay for teacher leaders at the summer institute, substitute teachers for monthly sessions, and materials.

Additionally, Luke secured funding to offer minigrants to academy teachers who wanted to formally take their learning back to their buildings. Minigrant funds were used to pay academy teachers for the time necessary to design formal learning opportunities for colleagues and to pay for needed materials. Some teacher leaders used what they learned in a train-the-trainers session on assessment to design building-based professional learning experiences for their colleagues. Others designed and led book studies on relevant content from the academy. Principals also supported minigrant work by securing time and materials for academy teachers to work with their colleagues.

### IMPACT

Multiple data sources reveal that year one of the Auburn Teacher Leadership Academy positively impacted teacher leaders, their colleagues, and students.

Academy teachers completed the teacher leadership skills framework self-assessment before and after the yearlong leadership sessions occurred. To complete the self-assessment, teachers indicated how frequently they use the knowledge, skills, and dispositions detailed in each of the five broad areas of the framework. They then placed themselves on a continuum to show their overall leadership ability in that area. On the post-assessment, academy teachers rated themselves higher in every area. The greatest change was in the area of working with adult learners. On the preassessment, only 26% of teachers rated themselves as refining or proficient, in contrast with 74% giving themselves those rankings on the post-assessment. Academy teachers also reported growth on all of the specific skills targeted through the academy, such as their ability to lead data-driven dialogue and developing norms of collaboration.

Additional data gleaned from the academy final evaluation shows impacts beyond the teachers involved. All academy teach-

#### Auburn School District

Auburn, Wash.

Number of schools: **22**

Enrollment: **14,495**

Staff: **888** certificated staff, **758** classified staff

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	<b>54.7%</b>
Black:	<b>7.7%</b>
Hispanic:	<b>19.9%</b>
Asian/Pacific Islander:	<b>10.5%</b>
Native American:	<b>2.0%</b>
Other:	<b>5.2%</b>

Limited English proficient: **12.5%**

Languages spoken: More than **45**

Free/reduced lunch: **52.1%**

Special education: **11.9%**

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## THEORY OF ACTION



ers reported that they use what they learned in their professional learning communities, grade-level or department meetings, and in the classroom. More than 80% indicated they used their skills in staff trainings. When asked how his participation in the academy benefited his colleagues, one high school teacher leader wrote, “We brought back all that we received during our monthly trainings, and many have become part of our current and future curriculum.” When asked how her participation in the academy benefited students, another teacher leader remarked, “My students benefited from the collaboration that came from participating in the academy. My team members and I are developing common power standards, and we are working with the grade after us to align our instruction.”

Academy teachers’ comments also reveal their increased sense of competence as leaders. One teacher leader reflected, “I really feel much more confident now as a young teacher.” An experienced teacher leader also felt the academy was beneficial, saying, “This was one of the most valuable things I have done in my career. I have grown as a person as well as a professional.” Many academy teachers pointed to specific skills they learned and how they applied them. For example, one participant remarked, “A strength is having the knowledge of protocols for facilitating discussions that I did not have prior to the academy. I now have not only the skills to lead an effective meeting, but also the tools.”

Principals and district leaders see the benefits of the academy at the system level. An elementary principal noted, “This has improved the overall climate within our school, as teachers now see the strengths within each other and how those strengths improve student learning throughout our building.” A middle school principal agreed, saying “As a principal, it is beneficial to have teacher leaders who can assist in creating a positive culture and help to move the school forward.” According to a high school principal, the academy gave teacher leaders “confidence and enabled them to present to the entire staff with authenticity and credibility.”

The most important impact of the academy will be on student learning. Auburn is analyzing data from formative and summative assessments at district and state levels in order to measure the impact of the entire strategic plan, including the academy. As the instructional leadership of academy teachers continues to develop through cohorts two and three, we anticipate more effective professional learning communities, which will positively impact instructional practice of teachers, and that

will in turn translate to student learning increases across the district, as illustrated in our theory of action (above).

## LESSONS FOR LEADERS

The academy’s successes in Auburn can be replicated in other settings. Leaders interested in similar strategic initiatives should consider the following:

1. Start by articulating a clear, long-term vision that drives strategic action steps. Be clear about how building the capacity of teacher leaders fits into the larger plan.
2. Examine existing human resources. If internal resources are not available, reach out and form partnerships to secure needed expertise.
3. Think creatively about how existing monetary resources connect with strategic goals and long-term vision. A variety of sources can complete a total funding package.
4. The resource of time is critical. Teacher leaders must have ample time to build knowledge and skills, practice them, and work within a supportive community of colleagues in order to build efficacy.
5. Choose a framework to guide your work that allows you to customize learning opportunities to meet the unique needs of your teachers. Be responsive to changing needs.

Through the academy, we’ve learned that the resource investment to build the leadership capacity of 50 teachers impacted each of them. However, the academy is not just an investment in individuals; it is a strategic investment to distribute leadership across the district in order to impact many. We anticipate the successes of the academy’s first year will be magnified exponentially in years two and three. Ultimately, this investment will benefit the most important stakeholders in Auburn: students.

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