



# WIDE-OPEN OPPORTUNITIES

TEACHER LEADERS CAN HELP RURAL SCHOOLS  
MAKE THE MOST OF MEAGER RESOURCES

By Melia Franklin

**D**uring a statewide literacy meeting, talk turned to reading resources and how to build literacy in schools across the state. “Our reading specialists are instrumental to improving literacy in our buildings,” said one administrator.

The executive director of literacy in another district said that her district had made huge strides when the literacy coaches made use of the work the school psychologist had done identifying students’ weaknesses.

I sat in the corner, silently working through the inequalities: Reading specialists? Literacy coaches? School psychologists? An executive director of literacy? In rural America, we have none of the above, and yet we are held to the same standards as our urban and suburban counterparts.

The Common Core State Standards are poised and waiting in the wings to make their debut. Testing those standards (as of the writing of this article) is slated to begin in the 2014-15 school year. Mandated accountability is on the lips of every legislator, filtering down to administrators, teachers, and students.

That resources are often allocated unevenly is not new news across rural America. We know that we are expected to do more with less — or rather, the same with less. I can name more than one rural district where the principal, bus driver, and basketball coach are the same person. The accountability remains the same. We must comply with No Child Left Behind or Race to the Top or whatever federal or state-driven initiative you name.

So what are educators in rural schools to do? There are two choices. We can complain about our situation, which might make us feel better but won’t solve anything. Or we can buck up and make better use of what we have: the teacher leader.



## SHARING LEADERSHIP

Susan Scott, in her book *Fierce Conversations*, says: “People yearn to be connected to something of substance. ... You have to trust the act of involving all of your employees ... to represent whatever beliefs and values they have” (Scott, 2002, p. 57). None of us wish to feel insignificant. Teaching is not lucrative enough to make it worth taking up so much of our time and energy without feeling valued. Valuing the potential leadership of the teacher validates his or her dedication to the field.

There’s plenty of research to indicate that the strong, silent leader of the past no longer fits the bill — the lone wolf who, through strong-armed determination and intimidation, fulfilled every role. The effective leader is one who shares the load, both the rights and the responsibilities, by building on the strengths of all (Avolio, 2007; Hazy, 2007; Lichtenstein, Uhl-Bien, & Marion, 2006). Leaders “thrive through shared power” (Franklin, 2011, p. 25). Shared power builds on mutual strengths.

There is a misconception that the school principal is the universal leader and teachers are merely the undermotivated subordinates. However, ask many administrators what they miss most about moving from the classroom to administration, and the response is almost universal: “I miss students. I miss watching learning in progress.” Student learning is the reason most administrators and teachers enter education. Teacher leaders remain in the classroom because they enjoy being with students. That’s a good thing. We need smart, competent, dedicated professionals in our classrooms. The stakes are too high not to have them working with students.

Teacher leaders are the individuals who opted to stay in the classroom. They support learning and can facilitate learning in other classrooms, too. Rather than seeing them as the lowest tier on the hierarchy of leadership, think of them as fellow officers in the trenches.

Teacher leaders are not hard to recognize. They are the teachers who seek out opportunities to lead. They volunteer for committees, attend conferences, and read professional literature. The services they offer the district are endless. Harrison and Killion (2007, pp. 74-77) suggest 10 roles teacher leaders can fulfill to support schools: resource provider, instructional specialist, curriculum specialist, classroom supporter, learning facilitator, mentor, school leader, data coach, catalyst for change, and learner.

Let’s explore the possibilities and offer a few authentic examples.

## TEACHER LEADERS IN ACTION

Imagine the first-year teacher: Although he is trying his best, with five new classes to prepare for, two coaching duties, and a class every hour full of 25 squirmy middle school students (not uncommon in rural schools), he is completely overwhelmed. He’d like to put his best foot

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forward and certainly does not want the administration to see him as anything but on top of his game. This was the conundrum facing Josh Moore, now a third-year math teacher, in rural Missouri. With the accessibility of a fellow teacher, he gained someone who gave him a different method of teaching or, when it went especially downhill, someone to whom he could vent.

My own experience as a rural teacher allowed me to serve as a resource specialist. An unofficial title, I was the go-to person when my fellow teachers needed a website, a curriculum development tool, or further curricular information. The district frequently sent me to state-level conferences to gather those resources to share with my peers. When asked why I would take on this (unpaid) task, I'd reply, "I like helping. I guess that's why I became a teacher. Besides, I really like going to the state

conferences. I'd rather see what's coming at me than duck my head in the sand and pretend 'this, too, shall pass.'"

Districts that embrace professional learning communities recognize that teacher leaders are the catalysts who make learning communities — or any initiative, for that matter — work or watch it fail. Teacher leaders often set the climate (either positive or negative) for an entire district. It seems everyone can recall a teacher, coach, or school leader without whose tacit consent no initiatives moved. But once that consent was given, the culture of the school was transformed, and reform sprinted forward.

The expertise a teacher leader can offer his or her peers is invaluable. A supervising administrator offering constructive advice can be quite daunting, especially to the novice teacher.

A fellow beside-me-in-the-dugout teacher offers a far less intimidating means of support and advice. David Kiene, a principal from Marceline R-V Schools in Missouri, says, "Although I make it a point of emphasis for teachers to approach me with concerns, very few do. Teacher leaders have a good sense of curriculum and good teaching practices. They are willing to share those with the staff."

Additionally, if supported in his or her own professional development, the teacher leader has the potential to lead the professional development of his or her peers, both formally and informally. Imagine handing over responsibility for modeling differentiation in the classroom to a teacher leader. According to Kiene, "Teacher leaders should feel that they should support the administration, view them as an ally, and wish for them to succeed."

It's easy to find the teacher leader. Look to the teacher who wants to improve his or her craft; look for the teacher who asks for meaningful feedback and suggestions for improvement, the reader of professional literature. Home in on these qualities,

and you'll have identified teacher leaders. Debbie Jameson, a rural teacher from Hannibal, Mo., says, "My own teaching style has emerged with every opportunity I have been given, from providing professional development to helping make decisions. I have learned more about myself as an educator as well as my strengths and weaknesses in the classroom."

The rural teacher leader is, in the words of one longtime teacher from Veteran Elementary in Hannibal, Mo., "a listening ear, judge, cheerleader, substitute, and tiebreaker. I have shared information with nearly every grade level. You learn from teaching others!"

Teacher leaders are there. Find them, encourage them, and draw on their strengths.

### WHAT TEACHER LEADERS NEED

How do we find, encourage, and draw on the strengths of the teacher leader? Here are a few recommendations.

**Fund professional development.** Yes, this means a commitment of resources. Set aside money to fund a seminar or course work, as well as for a substitute. The school gains another individual in the building to gather and disseminate research-driven teaching methods or updates on state or federal mandates.

**Send teacher leaders to conferences.** This sounds like funding professional development, but it's one step further. Find out what's happening in the region or within the state that involves teacher input. Get teacher leaders in there to see how high-stakes tests are developed and scored, literacy plans are created, or state curricular guidelines built.

**Entrust teacher leaders to make decisions.** Allow teacher leaders to prioritize decisions, but also allow them to make some stand-alone decisions, too. Think of decisions like parts of a body, spreading outward from the heart of an organization. Heart decisions are core and vital to the organization. Administration must be consulted on these points. Limb decisions are important, and, although the organization could survive without them, a poor decision could be devastating. Extremity decisions do not profoundly affect an organization. Allow teacher leaders to make extremity decisions and maybe some limb decisions. Look to build trust and a relationship with teacher leaders.

**Consult teacher leaders in real and meaningful ways.** There is nothing worse than pouring one's heart and soul into an organization only to have that care rejected or shrugged off. Ask for teacher leaders' opinions in matters that are real and are of consequence. Sincerity is vital.

**Value teacher leaders' input.** That is not to say that one must put into action every recommendation of teacher leaders. We all recognize (or at least we should) that our opinions are often clouded by the limited vantage point we have in our singular position. Gathering information and putting that information into consideration leads to building more teacher leaders.

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Rural schools face challenges that are very different from their urban or suburban counterparts. Fewer resources supporting rural schools mean smaller staffs and larger responsibilities for everyone. At the same time, rural schools and districts must meet the same standards as their larger, better-funded counterparts. One key to making the most of meager resources is to develop teacher leaders who can share their expertise with student, fellow teachers, and administrators alike. The recommendations outlined here illustrate that teacher leaders are an invaluable resource for rural schools.

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## Strength training

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all of the costs. It pays about \$26,000 per participant for pre-service training, \$240,000 a year for principal coaching, and as much as \$700,000 annually for professional development. Who are among the program's most vocal advocates? Its graduates, some of whom now hold top district positions and have a say in funding decisions.

The Providence effort is not the only one with alumni convinced that solid training is essential for success in the modern principalship. Just ask Bender. "It was kind of outrageous for me to think that I could be a principal," he says. "I had only taught for three years, period. The leadership academy provided me resiliency and focus. Its format is next to brilliant. Not until I had my own building did I realize how well I'd been prepared."

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