



Photo by YASMINE LAURENT

Andrea Richardson, left, and Deidra Holliday, T3 teacher leaders at Westside Middle School in the Achievement School District in Memphis, Tenn., examine student data as part of the data inquiry cycle.

BUOYED A NETWORK OF SUPPORT GUIDES TEACHER LEADERS IN HIGH-NEEDS SCHOOLS *on* ALL SIDES

By Marisa Suescun, Toby Romer, and Elisa MacDonald

The idea of teacher leadership holds an immense and intuitive appeal. Most educators agree that teacher leaders are essential to fostering a climate of authentic and robust leadership and learning across a school. Teacher leadership is peer leading at its most authentic, demanding, and empowering.

While the value of teacher leadership may be obvious, the path to realizing successful teacher leadership is not. That path is particularly rocky for educators pressured with the demands of transforming a chronically low-performing school into a high-achieving one. Simply placing an effective teacher in a role of leadership does not automatically make him or her a leader. Teachers who have developed competence in the classroom have not necessarily devel-

Teacher leaders need support from many angles, through a network of skillful, committed, and purposeful educators both within and outside of their schools.

oped competence in leading adults as learners or in leading systemic change in their schools (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). Emerging teacher leaders need sustained, intentional training and development targeted specifically to leadership development. In short, teacher leaders need support, too.

How do we support teacher leaders in high-needs schools in order to help students make swift, systematic, and measurable gains? This is the question that we at the Teach Plus T3 Initiative continuously seek to address.

The T3 Initiative (Turnaround Teacher Teams) was created by teachers to address the issue of attracting and retaining high-performing teachers in chronically low-performing schools. T3 recruits, develops, and supports teams of experienced teachers — teachers with a track record of success with urban students — to teach and lead in their schools and ultimately accelerate student learning across the school. T3 launched in 2010 in three turnaround schools in Boston Public Schools and now has expanded to work with 13 high-needs schools (both turnaround and not) across three districts, including Fall River Public Schools in Massachusetts and the Achievement School District in Memphis, Tenn. T3 seeks to build capacity from within the school: We first recruit existing teachers within our partner schools and then from other schools in the district and beyond.

Through our experiences supporting these T3 partner schools, we are discovering that teacher leadership is hard, sophisticated work, particularly in a chronically underperforming school. The most common leadership role of teacher leaders in T3 schools is team facilitator. Leading a team, whether an elementary grade-level or secondary content team, requires teacher leaders to get all of their colleagues working toward the common goals of the school and its turnaround efforts. At this level of leadership work, teacher leaders lead their teams in using data-driven inquiry as means to ensure that evidence of student learning and areas of need are continuously transformed into improved instruction.

Beyond being a strong leader in the classroom, and in his or her own teacher team, today's teacher leader must also see and communicate the larger instructional vision of the school and align decisions with that vision. The teacher leader must effectively participate in and lead schoolwide conversations with adults about systemic and organizational change.

Supporting teacher leaders in that work, particularly in high-needs schools, is indispensable to their success. Providing that support is also complex, nuanced, and resource-intensive. Teacher leaders need support from many angles, through a network of skillful, committed, and purposeful educators both within and outside of their schools.

THE TEACHER LEADER COHORT

Teacher leaders cannot — in fact, should not — act alone.

Teacher leaders benefit from belonging to a cohort in which they are able to collaborate with other teacher leaders to realize the mission and vision of the school. They meet regularly to communicate team progress and challenges. With their dual perspectives as teachers and team leaders, teacher leaders understand challenges the others in their cohort face in leading colleagues in swift, measurable change. They provide one another skillful, timely guidance, feedback, and resources to advance their learning and effectiveness.

The cohort acts not only as a means for ongoing professional learning, but also as a powerful team capable of leading and sustaining change in a school. According to Katzenmeyer & Moller, “A critical mass of teacher leaders engaged in a professional learning community can often maintain momentum in a school's improvement efforts, even during changes in formal, administrative leadership” (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009, p. 9). For example, the teacher leader cohort at Trotter Elementary School in Boston collaborated with Karen Loughran, their T3 coach who supports their leadership development, and their principal to design and implement whole-school learning walks.



Photo by YASMINE LAURENT

T3 teacher leaders from Boston Public Schools work together to establish learning targets for students. Jeremy Lo, center, is a T3 teacher leader at Dearborn Middle School; and, clockwise from left, Charles Harris, Emerson Kingston, Alison Brown, and Olivia Tapia are T3 teacher leaders at Mario Umana Middle School Academy.

They analyzed data to assess the school’s needs, designed observation tools, and determined how to involve faculty. They identified a need to include more support for higher-order thinking in their instruction. Last spring, the school conducted three learning walks, looking for evidence of higher-order questions. After each learning walk, teachers leaders led the staff debrief, reviewing their observations and the evidence they gathered, and engaged in professional development to support higher-order thinking. The school, recognizing how well learning walks support its goal to improve higher-order thinking skills, is continuing them this year. The teacher leaders’ ability to act as a cohort has enriched the impact and reach of this schoolwide learning experience.

THE T3 COACH

To support this work, as well as the individual and group development of the teacher leader cohort, a skillful, school-based T3 coach for teacher leaders is indispensable. The coach’s role is not new — many schools employ coaches to guide teachers in improving their instructional and pedagogical practice.

What most schools and districts have not considered is a coach dedicated to fostering teacher leadership.

T3 coaches provide an ongoing cycle of planning, observation, and feedback. The T3 coach provides three types of support for the individual teacher leader:

- Meets weekly with each teacher leader (and other relevant players, as needed) to plan leadership of team meetings or implementation of schoolwide initiatives;
- Observes and guides the teacher leader in weekly team meetings or leadership initiatives. The coach gives live feedback to the teacher leader and skillfully contributes to the team; and
- Partners with the teacher leader in an evidence-based debrief of the team’s function and impact. From this dialogue, they articulate next steps for further growth for the teacher leader and his or her team.

The T3 coach works individually, differentiating support for each teacher leader. He or she also works with the entire cohort of teacher leaders across the school. Responding to the group’s needs and interests, the coach provides team professional devel-

opment, facilitates sharing of resources and strategies within and outside of the school, and engages teacher leaders in working intentionally as a cohort to support the school's mission and goals.

At Blackstone Elementary School in Boston, T3 coach Lisa Lineweaver worked with the teacher leader of the 2nd-grade team to improve the team's data analysis — and act as a skillful facilitator of adult learning in the process. During one of the group's weekly meetings, Lineweaver and the teacher leader identified a need for the team to analyze end-of-unit math assessments beyond the overall performance level of students and move into a more detailed item analysis to generate instructionally actionable data.

They predicted possible resistance that team members might offer to this new level of focus, listed ways that resistance could play out, and role-played how the teacher leader could respond to concerns her teammates might raise. At the next team meeting, Lineweaver offered live feedback on sticky notes, recorded key interactions, and captured key facilitation moves that pushed the meeting forward.

Later that week, Lineweaver and the teacher leader debriefed the meeting and the next steps the team had agreed on, identifying the growth they had made and additional challenges that lay ahead. This timely, ongoing feedback from the coach helped the teacher leader develop her own skills and guide her grade-level team toward a more powerful use of student data.

THE PRINCIPAL

While a school-based T3 coach can be transformative to teacher leader development, the principal is the most critical person in ensuring that teacher leadership is valued and empowered across the school. The work of accelerating student learning demands a high level of urgency, focus, and commitment. To sustain this work requires distributing leadership among school staff. We collaborate with principals to foster shared leadership and help them clearly articulate teacher leader roles and expectations within their schools.

The principal establishes the structures and helps set a school culture that encourages distributed leadership, teacher collaboration and voice, and authentic staff engagement in schoolwide decisions. Together with the coach, the principal ensures accountability and fosters teacher leadership development.

At Orchard Gardens K-8 School in Boston, T3 teacher leader Lynni Nordheim led a teacher team that was using a traditional reading curriculum across elementary literacy classes. Nordheim and the teacher team noticed that the school's curriculum was not improving student literacy levels. She worked with the team to plan a guided reading component, implemented it with their students, and saw results. Nordheim suggested to the principal that the strategy be used for the entire school. The principal agreed. Nordheim gathered data of her team's student outcomes using the new literacy model and led the planning committee for the rollout of guided reading in all

elementary literacy classes. By fostering the collaboration of the teacher leader, coach, and members of the teacher leader team, the principal created an empowered and distributed leadership system capable of effecting change quickly.

THE T3 LINK LEADERSHIP COACH

An out-of-school T3 link leadership coach — someone who works with teacher leaders and T3 coaches across multiple schools and districts — is a powerful lever of teacher leader and coach support. Because the T3 link leadership coach isn't embedded in one school, he or she brings a valuable outside perspective. The link leadership coach is able to not only give ongoing feedback to coaches, but also recognize patterns and common needs of teacher leaders across the district. Using input from teacher leaders, the T3 link leadership coach works with school-based coaches to design and implement professional learning that connects teacher leaders from our partner schools that share similar purpose and urgency to achieve results for students.

For example, we brought together 1st- and 2nd-grade teacher leaders from our partner schools to share how they use data to meet team goals. One team displayed its data wall showing dramatic growth in 1st-graders' Developmental Reading Assessment scores in just a few months. Teacher leaders engaged in lively discussion about leading teams to these results. This network provides teacher leaders doing similar work and facing similar challenges opportunities to support each other with insight, resources, and potential solutions.

EFFECTIVE TOOLS FOR ASSESSMENT AND GROWTH

For the teacher leader network of support to be maximally effective, everyone involved must share a clear vision of what leadership looks like. We have developed a set of tools to help guide our own coaching and support of teacher leadership.

We began by developing key attributes of teacher leadership (see box above) to describe the broad spectrum of work that teacher leaders can and should engage in as school leaders.

To further define the continuum of leadership development, we turned to the work of Linda Lambert, who describes four stages of development of teacher leadership ranging from adult development to an understanding of organizational change. Lambert (2003) describes how effective teachers en-

Attributes of a T3 teacher leader

1. **Purpose-driven instructional leader:** Focused on what matters.
2. **Skillful facilitator of adult learning:** Invested in the growth of all learners.
3. **Evidence-based decision maker:** Turns data into actionable knowledge.
4. **Schoolwide change agent:** Driven to ensure sustainable change.
5. **Ongoing learner:** Insatiable in the quest for improvement.

Source: Teach Plus T3 Initiative.

tering leadership roles evolve from being successful in their independence, to understanding their interdependence within the school structure, to finally being able to exert leadership in shaping the landscape of their school community and beyond.

We adapted the rubrics of Lambert and others, creating an assessment continuum aligned with our attributes of teacher leadership. Teacher leaders work with their coaches to assess their own skills. To help teacher leaders turn their insights from these self-assessments into action, coaches work with teacher leaders to create a leadership action plan. For this action plan, T3 teacher leaders complete a four-quadrant graphic organizer that asks:

- Where am I now as a leader?
- What do I need to accomplish?
- What might get in the way?
- How will I get there?

For example, T3 teacher leader Demond Criss at Roger Clap Innovation School in Boston came to an important realization through working with coach Katie Hickey on the self-assessment process. Criss recognized that, while he felt confident proposing initiatives and leading change within his 1st- and 2nd-grade common planning time team, he had a tendency to, as he put it, “wait on the sidelines” rather than proposing or leading initiatives at the school level.

Criss’s realization gave him a specific focus for an action plan that was relevant for his leadership development and for the school’s improvement. Earlier in the year, Criss and his team had begun vertically aligning their curriculum with the Common Core State Standards and mapping out expectations between the two grade levels. Criss believed this work had significantly improved the team’s ability to impact student learning, and he and Hickey agreed that

modeling this process for the rest of the staff would be a step toward achieving the schoolwide priority to develop a vertically aligned curriculum from prekindergarten to 5th grade.

Throughout the spring, Criss and Hickey devoted time during their weekly one-on-one meetings to identify and update action steps connected to his action plan, which culminated with Criss leading a whole-school professional development session in June. Creating and implementing the T3 leadership action plan helped Criss to improve one element of his leadership in a focused and supportive manner.

Coaches and teacher leaders also use protocols to frame professional learning discourse. For example, a teacher leader cohort might use a protocol to focus on a professional challenge a teacher leader brings to the group. Not only is the protocol

useful to facilitate teacher leaders learning from one another, but it also can be applied to their work in leading teacher teams.

LEADING FOR STUDENT GROWTH

The work of teacher leaders — and the network of people who support that work — goes beyond the role of developing their own leadership and that of their colleagues. Teacher leaders, in supporting the growth of their fellow teachers, in turn support teaching and learning across the school, not just in their classrooms. The charge of teacher leaders, ultimately, is to help accelerate student learning and growth for every student in the school.

T3 is in its third year of partnering with district schools. Results so far show that T3 partner schools have produced substantially greater student achievement growth than other peer schools — and staff and administrators identify teacher leadership as a key component of that success. For example, at the middle school level, our T3 partner schools’ student growth in the 2012 statewide assessments outpaced all other schools in the Boston Public Schools by 16 percentage points in English language arts and 15 percentage points in math. At the elementary level, T3 partner schools growth outpaced all other district schools by 10 percentage points in English language arts and 15 percentage points in math. These results highlight the accelerated improvement that students in T3 partner schools are experiencing when compared to students in other district schools. While we are encouraged by such growth in student gains in schools using the T3 model, we recognize that we have a lot to learn as we continue to refine our model of teacher leadership in support of student outcomes.

Through this process, we realize anew a growth mindset that we seek to instill in our teacher leaders: to be a leader is to be a learner. Both require ongoing work, intentionality, flexibility, a solutions orientation, and a belief in one’s own and others’ capacity to learn. What teachers expect — and take inspiration from — in students they must exemplify as teacher leaders.

REFERENCES

Katzenmeyer, M. & Moller, G. (2009). *Awakening the sleeping giant: Helping teachers develop as leaders.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Lambert, L. (2003). *Leadership capacity for lasting school improvement.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Marisa Suescun (msuescun@teachplus.org) is a program manager for the Teach Plus T3 Initiative in Boston, Mass. Toby Romer (tromer@boston.k12.ma.us) is a T3 coach and director of professional development and data inquiry at Orchard Gardens K-8 Pilot School in Roxbury, Mass. Elisa MacDonald (emacdonald@teachplus.org) is director of teacher leader development for the Teach Plus T3 Initiative. ■

At the middle school level, our T3 partner schools’ student growth on the 2012 statewide assessments outpaced all other schools in the Boston Public Schools by 16 percentage points in English language arts and 15 percentage points in math.