

CHECKS AND BALANCES

BUILT-IN DATA ROUTINES MONITOR THE IMPACT OF BOSTON'S TEACHER LEADER PROGRAM

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Teacher leadership is not new to Boston Public Schools. Teachers in this district have always stepped up in formal and informal ways to assume roles that aim to improve teaching, learning, and school improvement.

As data team leaders, members of school leadership teams, grade-level leaders, mentors, and instructional coaches, teacher leaders have been recognized for making contributions to the improvement of teaching and learning in Boston (Education Commission of the States, 2005; Broad Foundation, 2006; Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010). In 2009, when the Boston Plan for Excellence, Boston's public education fund, approached Boston Public Schools about collaborating to create a teacher leadership certificate program that could expand teachers' capacity for teacher leadership roles like these, attention to impact was paramount.

The partners felt it was important to provide professional learning that strengthened teachers' leadership skills while also paying attention to whether and under what conditions they were more successful in their roles. Since the Boston Teacher Leadership Certificate program they were building was new and the literature on teacher leadership development scant, it was important to build a learning system: a series of routines that could regularly inform decision making about program content, process,

and implementation in context.

By incorporating time and tools to review data at multiple levels of the program, the certificate program team — comprised of program staff as well as teacher leaders who are course facilitators — has not only been able to monitor the effectiveness of this professional learning model, but has also constantly refined its process for ensuring participants succeed in their roles, facilitators lead effective learning experiences, and the larger program design meets the needs of Boston's reform plan. As a result, the more the program team inquires into what teachers are learning, the more the program learns from teachers (see figure on p. 25).

TAPPING INTO EXPERIENCE

In Boston, as in most districts today, teachers are increasingly being called on to assume additional nonteaching responsibilities that serve school improvement goals. Recognizing the critical needs these roles serve, teachers agree to take on these roles — frequently with little more than token compensation or recognition — yet they may or may not have the skills to carry out these important responsibilities effectively.

And why would they? The skills for leading a team to create and use data, providing colleagues with growth-oriented feedback on instruction, or leading a focused meeting of adults who may not want to be there — to name just

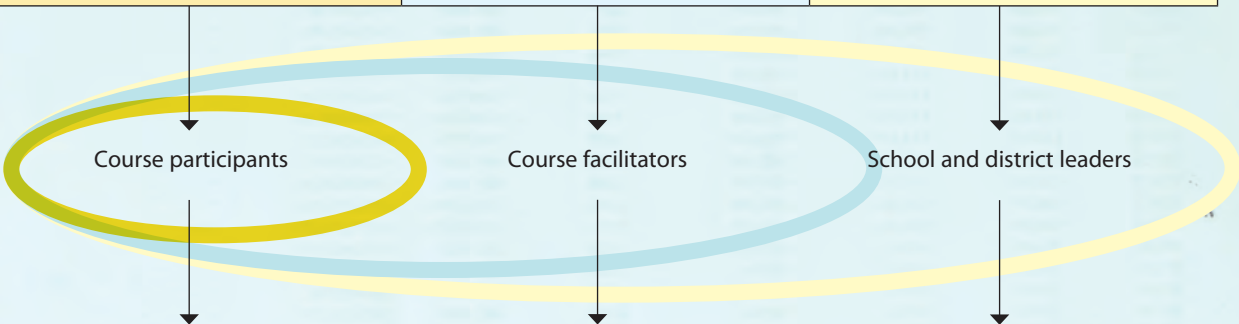
BOSTON TEACHER LEADERSHIP CERTIFICATE PROGRAM

WHAT THEY ARE LEARNING

What are the specific things the Boston Teacher Leadership Certificate program wants to support participants, facilitators, and school and district leaders to be able to do?

SKILLS AND STRATEGIES FOR:

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leading data use. Supporting instruction. Participating within shared leadership structures. Tapping the knowledge base of professional expertise. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitation. Supporting adult learning. Stimulating professional learning that leads to changes in practice. Establishing a professional learning community. Building enriching professional connections. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizing teacher leader roles to address local goals. Creating time for teacher leaders' work. Clarifying or defining teacher leader roles and responsibilities. Communication and coordination routines. |
|---|--|--|



INSIGHTS INTO:

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenges faced by teacher leaders (logistical, intellectual, sociopolitical, etc.). What resources are needed. Picture of the work on the ground. Impact of the role on students, colleagues, and on career satisfaction. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effectiveness of course design. Utility and quality of our shared tool kit of materials. Better understanding of what's generalizable across roles and what's role-specific. Tool kit additions needed. Impact of facilitation role on personal and professional satisfaction. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Systemic needs and support needed. Resources needed. Learning what will be useful to share across schools. How schools perceive (and misunderstand) these roles. Tools needed for resource library. Impact on school culture. |
|--|--|--|

WHAT WE ARE LEARNING

What are the things the program team doesn't know or needs to know more about? What are the areas in which the program seeks to build new knowledge?

a few — are not traditionally part of teacher training. But they are teachable skills, and each teacher leader should not be left to develop these skills or reinvent new strategies on his or her own.

Boston benefits from a long history of teachers holding formal teacher leadership roles. Whether teacher leaders received training through past programs or grants or figured out what works on their own, they are a gold mine of human capital.

The Boston Teacher Leadership Certificate program tapped these experienced teacher leaders to design and facilitate graduate-level courses by providing support and a structure for them to become professional learning leaders who can help to expand leadership capacity in the district.

The courses are offered to other teacher leaders who hold leadership roles in the district. Participation is voluntary and comes with the added benefits of being able to earn graduate credit and to network with colleagues throughout the district. In the four years since the program began, more than 100 teachers have participated.

In the program design phase, the certificate program director and associate focused on two important measures of success. The first was the extent to which participating teacher leaders were able to successfully strengthen core skills identified as critical to their roles. A second measure of the program's success was the extent to which teachers felt their participation was improving their ability to have a positive impact on colleagues' teaching practice.

Thus, with key principles of organizational learning in mind, the certificate program team set out to build systems that would allow them to learn from the program's own evidence about how to help teachers build the skills they need for success in their roles. The team pursued "the deliberate use of individual, group, and system learning to embed new thinking and practices that continuously renew and transform the organization in ways that support shared aims" (Collinson & Cook, 2007, p. 31).

SYSTEMATIC DATA ROUTINES

To monitor the program's impact, the Boston Teacher Leadership Certificate program uses four data routines: comparing pre- and post-course surveys, analyzing exit slips, reviewing online discussions, and looking together at student work, which in this case are course performance assessments. These routines support collaborative inquiry, shared ownership for the quality of the work, and learning at all levels.

Pre- and post-course surveys

Course participants complete pre- and post-course surveys in which they report on their perceived skill level relative to course competencies as well as their sense of satisfaction with and support in their teacher leadership roles. These surveys guide facilitators and directors in planning course instruction as well as evaluating the program.

The precourse survey results drive facilitators' planning, enabling them to select learning designs that capitalize on teachers' expertise while also addressing individual learning needs. When facilitators compare pre- and post-course surveys, they are able to identify what worked and what they need to adjust for next time.

The surveys simultaneously support the program director several ways. Surveys allow the director to monitor participants' skill growth at the close of each course and to make necessary adjustments at the program level. They also guide her response to facilitators' needs as professional learning leaders. She can provide facilitators with support or resources to better meet participants' needs.

In addition, these surveys have helped to shape course curricula. For instance, early survey responses revealed that teachers in the data course felt they were indeed learning to use data, but such knowledge influenced only their own classroom practice without effectively giving them skills to confidently lead others in data use.

The responses led the certificate program team to teach strategies for engaging others in data use more explicitly. The team also refined and reordered the core competencies of this course so that preparing a team for data use was introduced earlier in the curriculum and allowed participants to spend sufficient time and attention on this specific skill.

Exit slips

At the end of each course session, all participants complete an online exit slip that employs a framework aligned with Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011). Participants are asked to reflect on the quality of their experience in terms of course context, content, and process. This data shapes facilitator focus, participant learning, director decisions, and program plans.

The exit slips are important for facilitators' planning. As one facilitator described, "The exit slips not only helped us understand what was going on but led us to a focused effort to move forward in addressing participants' concerns." When exit slips revealed that the pace of a class was too slow, facilitators learned to pick things up. When participants reported that they still had questions about how to introduce a new tool to their teams, facilitators recognized that they could model this in class each time they introduce a resource. And when participants were challenged by conversations with colleagues, role-plays became a more frequent instructional strategy.

"It allowed us to look for trends and not make assumptions about the participants' learning or how the work was landing in their schools," the facilitator said. They were able to make informed decisions about adjustments necessary to be more effective facilitators.

One facilitator reflected on the value that the exit slips also have for participants: "By sharing a summary of the exit slips

COURSE ASSESSMENTS

Core skills, competencies, and performance-based assessments for the four core courses of the Boston Teacher Leadership Certificate program.

| CORE SKILL | CORE COMPETENCIES | PERFORMANCE-BASED ASSESSMENTS |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| Using data | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding and analyzing data. Creating a data culture. Using data to inform decisions. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Identify a priority problem using multiple data sources, one analyzed in Excel. Analyze and address conditions affecting team engagement and culturally competent conversations about data. Lead team to create and test a hypothesis for a high-leverage change the team can make to address the priority problem and communicate results to three different audiences. |
| Supporting instruction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitating growth-oriented dialogue about instruction. Expanding colleagues' instructional resources and routines. Leading effective professional learning experiences. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Observe self and a colleague around a problem of practice, then analyze both and lead a conversation about the instruction. Identify, experiment with, and evaluate an instructional resource in support of the identified problem of practice. Plan, implement, and evaluate a professional learning experience. |
| Shared leadership | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthening unity of vision on a team. Managing an effective team. Understanding self and team as part of a system. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Assess the level of trust and unity of vision on a team; implement a plan to strengthen them. Use knowledge of self and the team to identify and introduce routines for improving the team's process. Create a map illustrating the team's theory of action and its relationship to other relevant teams; initiate efforts to improve communication within the system. |
| Professional expertise | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maximizing professional expertise. Tapping into education's knowledge base. Taking action for instructional improvement. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Cultivate conditions for tapping internal expertise and maximizing organizational learning around an instructional area of focus. Identify and evaluate professional literature relevant to the area of focus. Develop practical, research-informed recommendations to improve organizational policies or routines around the area of focus. |

at the beginning of each class, participants were also able know they were being heard and to see what they have in common with others.”

Some facilitators have even used the exit slips as part of a summative reflective exercise, returning exit slips to participants before the close of a course to encourage reflection on their experiences as a learner.

The exit slips also support success at a program level. The program director is able to review these online responses remotely to oversee all of the courses, despite their being geographically scattered throughout the city. Without the online platform, effective quality control would require additional resources and energy or a more narrow program focus. The program director also regularly reviews the accumulated exit slip responses with attention to key themes and trends that can shape professional learning support for facilitators and thereby contribute to growing the professional learning leaders the district needs.

The data also has the ability to inform systemic decision making. At one of their quarterly reflection meetings, facilitators sorted the printed responses from exit slips into groups to better understand the factors that, according to participants, made it easy or hard to employ course-based knowledge in their professional practice. This exercise drove some program adjustments, but, as one facilitator noted, “it also allowed us to sort out what was in our control to be addressed and what was not.”

Issues that cropped up across all programs pointed to systemic issues that were beyond the scope of what the program could accomplish. This valuable data led to the development of new tools that have been shared with school leaders and district partners who are in a position to use them.

ONLINE DISCUSSION

Throughout each Boston Teacher Leadership Certificate course, participants engage in a shared, online, asynchronous

discussion of relevant literature. This allows for continuous engagement with course material while also yielding data with implications for participant learning, facilitator involvement, and program design.

Online discussion allows participants to take more time to consider how they will apply course content in their own context, invites them to report to the group when experimenting with new skills, and enables teachers at varied levels of mastery to engage at their own level. The discussion forum also supports the group to process and address issues outside of the face-to-face time or return to conversations that were initiated in class as needed.

Viewing the discussion as data allows facilitators to see which issues are most salient among teachers in their practice and then think critically about how their course facilitation

aligns with participants' needs and experiences. "As a facilitator, reviewing the discussion board helps me keep a pulse on the group and make necessary changes to the face-to-face agendas based on the group's needs," one facilitator reported.

Facilitators note that the extent to which participants are able to provide one another with advice, challenge, and responses online is also valuable data. In fact, teachers report that they feel the social capital they build in these courses is of high value to them and allows for greater impact of the work. In this way, data-driven inquiry leads to both indi-

vidual and organizational learning.

At the same time, the online discussion forum allows the program director to monitor program development. On one occasion, for example, analysis of the discussion forum led the director to question the necessity of an expensive course textbook. In another instance, it became apparent in an online discussion that dealing with difficult colleagues was a prominent issue. The director responded by working with facilitators to add a section to the curriculum on managing resistance, complete with articles, resources, strategies, and role-playing activities.

PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENTS

In the Boston Teacher Leadership Certificate program, each of the four core courses has clearly articulated competencies with aligned performance assessments and rubrics. These assessments facilitate feedback to participants about their skills relative to course competencies, while facilitators use the same information to shape their planning. All the while, the assessments support longitudinal reflection on program strategies and accomplishments.

Participants complete performance tasks that are reviewed

by facilitators and peers throughout the progression of the course (see chart on p. 27). The assessments are authentic indicators of whether teachers have the skills to do the work because they are the work.

"The assessments are just like the rest of the course — based in reality," said one participant. One facilitator noted, "One of the biggest strengths of the courses and the assessments is that they provide a safe working space for experimentation and learning."

Participants learn from the process of putting skills to use and reflecting with others what it means to perform these skills well. What they learn from each other during peer review also supports their success. As one teacher noted, "You can see in the assessments where a participant has tried and hit a roadblock and then what they did about it."

As professional learning leaders, facilitators also use the assessments as information to broaden their impact: "An added bonus for me as a facilitator is getting to read everyone's assessments, reading about real life action plans and ideas I can take to my own school and implement," one facilitator reported.

Because courses are backward-designed with the final assessment in mind, participants' challenges with the assessments may lead to program changes. In some cases, course content has been changed to better prepare participants for successful performance on the final assessments. This was the case in the data course, for which course developers had determined that effective data leaders needed to be able to demonstrate proficiency with the data analysis tools in Excel. Some teachers struggled with this piece, prompting course facilitators to further differentiate their approach to teaching Excel skills.

SUPPORTING LEARNING

The Boston Teacher Leadership Certificate program's work has been nurtured by data routines that are valuable for participant, facilitator, and school and district learning. At the same time, by examining what they are learning, how they are learning it, and how well, the program team is able to glean insights that are helpful for evaluating impact and supporting improvement.

At the outset, the goal was to create a program that would help teacher leaders strengthen skills they need for success in their roles. To date, program data confirm that the courses are making a difference, as the percentage of teachers who report that they perform the core competencies of the course regularly or confidently in their roles went from 25% before beginning a course on average to more than 75% after it. In addition, 95% of course participants indicated in post-course surveys that the course they had completed would improve their ability to have a positive impact on others' teaching practice, and almost 91% felt that the course would have a positive impact on their own teaching practice.

At the same time, the certificate program's homegrown col-

COMING IN DECEMBER

After analyzing feedback from participants, the Boston Teacher Leadership Certificate program identified four conditions critical to teacher leaders' effectiveness. Read more in the December issue of *JSD*.

lection of tools and routines allows the program team to use data to inform organizational decision making at multiple levels — shaping the content of the program, informing the actions and roles of facilitators, and revisiting the structures as necessary to improve progress toward the program’s goals.

When such routines are in place, they compel the program team to not only ask, “What are they learning?” but also, “What are we learning that can help us build a better program? What are we learning that could inform others within the system about how to improve conditions for teacher leaders? What are we learning that can help improve teacher leadership practice beyond our own settings?”

With strong data routines around program evaluation, the Boston Teacher Leadership Certificate program team is supporting learning at all levels.

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