



PARTNERS IN LEARNING

TEACHER LEADERS DRIVE INSTRUCTIONAL EXCELLENCE

By Victoria Duff and M. René Islas

New educator evaluation systems demand a focus on effective teaching and learning while promoting the professional growth of all teachers.

Districts experiencing successful implementation of these systems recognize they must depend on teachers

and leaders to collaborate in building strong cultures of shared responsibility, support colleagues through the change process, and model and provide feedback on effective instructional practices that get results for students.

By identifying and leveraging the contributions of high-performing teachers as instructional leaders, problem solvers, and decision-makers to lead improvement at the classroom level, the system builds capacity for quality practice at all levels and builds internal expertise.



Numerous studies (York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Louis & Marks, 1998; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004) have shown the positive effect that high-performing teachers can have on the practices of their peers. These master teachers or teacher leaders are influencers who can help articulate the look and feel of instructional excellence and its impact on student learning.

Working with colleagues in their schools, they have become a critical lever in building the capacity of peers to engage in a continuous cycle of learning and improvement.

LESSONS LEARNED IN PRACTICE

The 12 partnership districts in the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Supporting Effective Teaching Knowledge Development Initiative (see box at right) have spent the past two years building, modifying, and enhancing the roles and responsibilities of teacher leaders to strengthen the quality of school culture, improve the practice of teaching, and foster a deep commitment to professional growth.

In many of the districts, teacher leaders, working alongside school and district leaders, have been empowered to share expertise and build strong communities of learners. Formally and informally, they assist colleagues in solving instructional problems that surface in day-to-day work by challenging assumptions that

ABOUT THE INITIATIVE

Since 2012, Learning Forward's Center for Results has supported 12 high-profile school systems to leverage professional learning to improve educator effectiveness. Sites participating in the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation-funded network, called the Supporting Effective Teaching Knowledge Development Initiative, applied and collaboratively refined the framework and tools presented in the report, *Supporting Effective Teaching: Professional Learning Insights from 12 Leading Districts* (Duff & Islas, in press), from which this article is adapted.

Participating sites found the tools helpful in identifying gaps in existing professional learning, planning for future professional learning, and evaluating the impact of professional learning.

The full report offers an analysis of key lessons learned across the 12 sites. Participants identified these key concepts in discussion, reflection, and implementation of creating their learning systems:

1. Clarify the purposes of professional learning;
2. Identify roles and responsibilities for professional learning;
3. Create differentiated learning to meet all teachers' needs;
4. Monitor the impact of professional learning; and
5. Drive instructional excellence by supporting teacher leaders.

Reference

Duff, V. & Islas, M.R. (in press). *Supporting effective teaching: Professional learning insights from 12 leading districts*. Seattle, WA: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR RESULTS

Learning Forward's Center for Results supports education leaders in developing systems to improve educator effectiveness and student achievement. The center offers high-impact consulting and programs strictly aligned with Learning Forward's research and body of knowledge in effective professional learning to support deep implementation in schools. For more information, visit www.learningforward.org/centerforresults.

• **TOOL, p. 16. Guiding questions on teacher leadership**

may hinder growth, working to uncover student needs based on relevant data, and providing feedback based on the teacher effectiveness framework that improves instructional practice.

Teacher leadership is one arm of support needed to ensure teachers have access to learning opportunities that can transform how instruction takes place and the results students see in their own work. (See “Teacher leaders in Hillsborough County” below.)

As work in the districts progresses, six elements have emerged as key factors in cultivating the expertise of these master teachers and establishing multiple leadership opportunities to support colleagues:

1. District stakeholders identify the theory of action and vision to drive decisions for implementing teacher leader opportunities and the roles teacher leaders will play.
2. Central office staff, principals, and teachers work together to define a set of criteria for selection of teacher leaders.
3. School leaders engage in learning and networking opportunities and have access to essential resources to assist them in creating a school environment that advances teacher leadership.
4. Clear communication provides all stakeholders information about the benefits, successes, challenges, and outcomes of teacher leadership.
5. Teacher leaders participate in ongoing and regular learning to support their growth and development.
6. Teacher leadership opportunities, as with all professional

TEACHER LEADERS IN HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY

Hillsborough County (Fla.) Public Schools offers leadership opportunities to teachers through its Empowering Effective Teachers program. Highly effective teachers may apply to become peer observers, mentors, or connectors.

Each teacher leader role has distinct responsibilities:

- **Peer observers** work with veteran teachers, observing teachers multiple times a year, providing feedback and input on a teacher’s evaluation.
- **Peer mentors** provide support to new teachers on a weekly basis by observing and providing feedback, modeling lessons, co-teaching and conferencing, and offering input on evaluation.
- **Peer connectors** offer support to a school for teachers who want to know more about the evaluation rubric and process.

For more information on the program, visit <http://communication.sdhc.k12.fl.us/empoweringteachers>.

learning, are regularly monitored for impact on teacher behavior and practices and student learning.

These elements offer a path for other districts to consider in leveraging the expertise that resides within each site.

SET THE VISION

The 12 sites participating in the initiative have embraced the intentional use of teacher leaders and created multiple paths for leadership aligned to the vision and mission of the district’s goals for student learning.

Administrators and teachers collaborate to create a clear theory of action to distinguish the work of teacher leaders in supporting quality instructional practices. Thoughtful discussion and decisions about the many formal or informal roles and responsibilities of teacher leaders are the foundation for implementation.

Some teacher leaders may work on district, state, or national leadership teams to develop and advocate for policy, procedures and resources for adult learning, curriculum development, and effective assessment practices.

Others may act as instructional coaches, data coaches, mentors in the induction program, or department chairs who focus on providing feedback to improve classroom practice based on student and teacher needs.

Still others may develop and lead professional learning and support grade-level or content-area teams in engaging in deep learning around relevant problems of practice. And some may perform all these roles.

Whatever vision the district constructs for the role of teacher leader, the teacher leader’s role must be aligned to the district’s vision for student learning and must focus on improving classroom performance of all teachers.

IDENTIFY THE CRITERIA

The selection of teacher leaders is driven by the premise that teachers leaders are those who “lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence others toward improved educational practice” (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). In other words, districts and schools should identify those teacher leaders who exemplify the following behaviors:

- Model and articulate best practice;
- Promote shared learning and continuous improvement as the path to high-performing schools and classrooms;
- Give, receive, and help others to act on feedback;
- Act as a bridge between understanding a new initiative and its implementation;
- Provide appropriate resources; and
- Foster positive relationships.

Teacher leaders who play these roles can provide transformative leadership that guides effective instruction, helping peers improve performance.

SUPPORT LEADERS

In districts participating in the initiative, central office provides the impetus for and sets policy, guidance, and resources to build strong teacher leadership models focused on the goals of the district.

In collaboration with other stakeholders, they have drafted the frame for the work of teacher leaders, collaborated with schools to provide the supports and time for teacher leaders to do their work, and monitored the successes and challenges of the program.

Teacher leadership thrives in schools where principals and other administrators nurture implementation and believe that distributing leadership maintains a focus on supporting instructional practice and student learning. These leaders establish expectations for outcomes and how colleagues will work together.

However, school leaders, whose work is both instructional and managerial, need the assistance of central office colleagues to effectively navigate the implementation of new roles for teacher leaders. As they lead to build leadership in others, principals will need time for their own learning through principal communities or networks of learners.

A principal, as the lead learner, must build his or her own knowledge and competencies in planning for and implementing new roles for teachers and the professional learning that will develop leadership skills in others.

COMMUNICATE THE WORK

Communicating the expectations for and benefits of how teacher leaders interact in formal or informal ways within the system has been essential to success in the partnership sites.

The use of websites, Moodles, wikis, guidance documents, FAQs, and other digital avenues allows for transparency of the process. Principals, teacher leaders, and colleagues need absolute clarity on the roles teacher leaders will assume and how these efforts will be supported in the reform process.

Clearly identifying how teacher leadership roles will strengthen the existing culture and foster growth and improvement in practice paves the way for creating effective collaborative professional learning structures whose focus is improved student learning.

BUILD SUPPORT

Teacher leaders need intensive support to maintain a high level of performance. The 12 sites participating in the initiative found that it is imperative that teacher leaders be provided sufficient time to engage successfully with the work they are doing, have access to continuous content-based learning, engage with peers to share learning and reflect on successes and challenges, and receive regular feedback that guides revisions to their practice.

The daily learning platform is found in classrooms they observe, team discussions they facilitate, and the give-and-take of

the feedback loops they use.

Maintaining a strong connection to classroom practice ensures teacher leaders can monitor their own ability to translate effective practice into positive student outcomes and promotes trust among their colleagues.

MONITOR IMPACT

Monitoring the impact of teacher leadership on a change in teacher behaviors and practices linked to student learning is critical to advance the process.

In setting a strong course for teacher leaders, districts want evidence of their impact in classrooms and data about areas where modifications of the program may be needed. Across all the participating sites, this element continues to be the most elusive element to implement and is an ongoing goal for the program.

PARTNERS FOR EXCELLENCE

A recent study on teacher leadership published by the Aspen Institute reminds us that “the dynamism of teacher leadership serves as a lever for recruiting and retaining top talent, strengthening the most effective teachers, helping other teachers improve, distributing leadership, and experimenting with new ways of organizing instruction so that teaching roles are differentiated and the teachers with proven ability reach more students” (Curtis, 2013). As district and school leaders learned in the 12 participating systems, teacher leaders are vital partners in advancing schoolwide professional growth when they are carefully supported and working toward a commonly held vision.

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GUIDING QUESTIONS ON TEACHER LEADERSHIP

Teacher leadership can promote deeper learning of all educators tied to improved student achievement. Use the following questions to guide a discussion to articulate the intended outcomes for leveraging the knowledge and skills of teacher leaders.

1	<p>What is the district’s vision for implementing a teacher leadership model?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who will help determine the vision? • What expertise resides in the district to meet the vision? • How is the vision aligned to student learning goals?
2	<p>How will the district leverage the expertise of high-performing teachers to facilitate improvement in instruction and support district priorities (e.g. educator effectiveness, college- and career-ready standards, assessment literacy)?</p>
3	<p>What specific roles and responsibilities will teacher leaders take on in various efforts?</p>
4	<p>What criteria will be used to determine how teacher leaders will be selected?</p>
5	<p>How will school leaders be supported in developing the culture for teacher leadership?</p>
6	<p>How will teacher leaders be supported in their work?</p>
7	<p>How will the intentional use of teacher leadership be communicated?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the expectations for leaders? • What are the expectations for teacher leaders? • How will teachers work with and share learning with teacher leaders? • What are the benefits of teacher leadership? • How will challenges be addressed?
8	<p>How will the teacher leadership program be monitored? How will results be used to make improvements?</p>