



Photo by GERALD CHAPMAN

The 4th-grade team studies graphic organizers. Clockwise from front left, Daisy Rivas, Jennifer Ponce, Ana Baltazar, Katie Kyle, Kelly Thomas, Margo Lewallen, Lucero Munoz, Jennifer Medina, and Nuri Gonzalez.

# BUILDING COMMUNITY

## 4TH-GRADE TEAM REACHES THROUGH CLASSROOM WALLS TO COLLABORATE

By Sue Chapman

Imagine, for a second, a school where teachers see themselves as leaders and work together to ensure that all children have access to engaging, high-quality instruction every day. How might these teachers define teacher leadership and articulate its purpose? What suggestions would they offer about how teacher leadership can be grown and supported? What might these teacher leaders say about their reasons for choosing to participate in leadership work?

The actions and reflections of the 4th-grade teacher

team from McWhirter Elementary Professional Development Laboratory School in Webster, Texas, offer an inside look at the self-organizing system of team-based teacher leadership that stands ready to help transform schools.

During a team meeting, the group had sketched out its professional learning plan for the next semester. Teacher Nuri Gonzalez voiced the question on everyone's mind: "How will we measure whether our learning is making a difference to our students?"

Teachers across the district had just received electronic tablets to support teaching and learning. Each student in 4th grade would be provided with a tablet within the next

year. Meanwhile, all teachers would attend traditional professional development to learn to use this new tool.

However, the 4th-grade team knew that, unless it took ownership for this school improvement initiative, the impact on classroom practice and student learning would be negligible. The team decided to collaborate in crafting lessons that would incorporate the use of this new technology and then study the effects of these lessons on student engagement and learning.

Team members developed a rubric to assess engagement and chose to measure students' use of targeted academic vocabulary in writing samples collected before and after the lessons. Once teachers had implemented the lessons, the team would review the data to determine whether the technology-enhanced lessons had increased student engagement and use of academic language.

Teacher learning teams provide a structure that can focus and accelerate school-based instructional improvement initiatives. In high-functioning teacher teams such as this one, teacher leadership flourishes. This shared leadership enables teachers to reach through the isolation of their individual classroom practice and build a collaborative community dedicated to the success of all students.

## LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING

Instructional leadership and professional learning are parallel processes. In this 4th-grade team, teachers participate in job-embedded professional learning and instructional leadership as a regular part of their teaching responsibilities.

Professional learning is considered a form of leadership because it enables teachers to find answers to problems of instructional practice that result in improved student learning. Sergiovanni describes this form of shared leadership as “a community of practice within which teaching, leading, and learning are thought of as a single practice shared by many” (2005, p. 13).

A leading-learning practice acknowledges that the work of teaching is both important and complex and, as a result, educators must learn from and with each other every day so

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Read two previously published articles about this school:

- “Moving in unexpected directions: Texas elementary uses exploratory research to map out an evaluation plan,” *JSD*, October 2013.
- “Tight budget loosens creativity: District turns to distance learning to stretch development dollars,” *JSD*, February 2012.

Available online at [www.learningforward.org/publications/jsd](http://www.learningforward.org/publications/jsd).

that schools can improve every day. This model of school leadership maintains that schools learn as teachers work together to construct shared professional knowledge. When members of a school community think, problem solve, and learn together, schools are transformed into learning organizations committed to the continuous improvement of student achievement.

## DEFINING TEACHER LEADERSHIP

Teacher leaders are key players in this model of collaborative school leadership. Teacher leadership is a term used to describe the developing concept of teacher involvement in school improvement.

According to Reeves, “Teaching and leadership are inseparable qualities” (2008, p. 1). Teaching is the act of facilitating learning. Leadership can be understood as the act of facilitating organizational learning (Chapman, Leonard, Burciaga, & Jernigan, 2013). Harris suggests that when we place the word teacher in front of the word *leadership*, this combination of terms does not simply suggest that teachers will participate in leadership activities, but advocates “a fundamental redistribution of power and influence within the school as an organization” (2003, p. 322).

When teachers choose to extend their sphere of influence beyond the four walls of their classrooms, school leadership evolves from a top-down process to a multidirectional practice performed by people across the school community.

Leadership work takes place in the interactions that

occur between teachers and with other members of the school organization. Leadership is stretched over both teachers and administrators as they work together to improve opportunities for student learning (Spillane, 2006).

This collaborative leadership practice is strengthened by the diverse perspectives and experiences of all members of a school community. Teacher leadership does not require a formal role — all teachers are invited to participate in the work of leadership for school improvement. At McWhirter, teacher leadership is an accepted feature of school culture. Informal teacher leadership is performed as teachers experiment with their instructional practice and share their learning with colleagues. Teachers are encouraged to generate professional knowledge that improves learning opportunities for students.

As McWhirter intervention teacher Jennifer Medina says, “Teacher leadership occurs when a teacher has the desire to make a difference without an expectation for recognition. This type of leadership happens on our team every day and, because of its genuineness, it cannot be stopped. It is contagious, touching the hearts of everyone and setting in motion a cycle of motivation, growth, and success.”

This organic form of teacher leadership is complemented by the more formal teacher leadership of McWhirter’s team leaders and instructional coaches who provide focused and intentional support for instructional improvement initiatives.

### LEADERSHIP WITHIN TEAMS

Teacher leadership and teacher learning teams are both essential to shared school leadership. Teacher leadership is the driving force behind effective teacher learning teams. Teacher learning teams, in turn, ignite and intensify teacher leadership as a dynamic within the school. As teacher learning teams and teacher leadership grow stronger, a school’s ability to maximize student learning grows exponentially.

Teacher leadership is vital to high-functioning teacher learning teams. Teacher leaders work with others to tackle tough challenges and help colleagues see new possibilities. They are highly attuned to the interdependent nature of school dynamics.

McWhirter’s 4th-grade team includes four bilingual and three general education classes. Literacy instruction in the four bilingual classes alternates between Spanish and English units across the year. When teacher Mariel Moreno became concerned about her English language learners’ reluctance to participate in classroom discussions during English units, she turned to her team for help.

Together they brainstormed ways to build students’ skill and confidence speaking in English. The team then met with school administrators to propose combining ELLs and non-ELLs during English units to provide ELLs with English-speaking role models and an authentic purpose for conversing in English.

As a result, ELL student participation increased during

classroom discussions conducted in English. An added result was a visible improvement in student respect for diversity and cultural proficiency across the grade level.

According to Ackerman and Mackenzie, “Teacher leaders live and work with other people, and their connection with others is where their leadership lies. Collegueship, the role of the individual in and of the collective, concerns them most” (2007, p. 147).

This concept of teacher leadership is related to the idea of *holonomy*, the notion of individual behavior within interdependent systems (Costa & Garmston, 2002). A holonomous teacher leader consciously learns and accepts support from her team. She also recognizes that she can contribute to her team’s success and influence its standards for professional behavior.

Teacher leaders know that, by working together with colleagues, they can positively impact learning for students across the school community. Teacher Stefanie Friedman, a member of the 4th-grade team at McWhirter, agrees: “Our team recognizes that each teacher has her own style, but we are united by a desire to see our children succeed. We each have unique strengths and, when we pull together, it seems that we can solve any problem. When a student is not making progress, the team comes together to offer suggestions and create a plan. Every child benefits from the team’s collective intelligence.”

Teacher leaders are self-directed learners. Teacher learning teams take initiative and responsibility for their own professional learning. As teachers create and share professional expertise, “they are on the way to building a true profession of teaching, a profession in which members take responsibility for steady and lasting improvement” (Hiebert & Stigler, 2004, p. 14). When teachers see themselves as knowledgeable professionals capable of refining their instructional practice, they take on the stance and spirit of teacher leadership.

Participation in teacher learning teams awakens teachers’ leadership identity. Lambert says, “Teachers become fully alive when their schools and districts provide opportunities for skillful participation, inquiry, dialogue, and reflection. They become more alive in the company of others. Such environments evoke and grow teacher leadership” (2003, p. 422).

When teachers participate in professional learning alongside colleagues, they build their instructional expertise while simultaneously practicing leadership skills. Teacher-initiated professional learning in learning teams contributes to instructional reform, which results in increased teacher leadership. This cycle strengthens a school’s shared leadership practice and builds momentum for continuous school improvement.

When the 4th-grade team’s analysis of student learning data pointed to the need to strengthen students’ skills in expository writing, the team decided to invest time learning how to integrate writing activities into content-area instruction. The team requested funds to purchase copies of a professional book for a team book study.

Later, a member of the team worked with a colleague from another grade level to offer an online version of this book study to interested teachers across the school. This teacher-initiated study sparked schoolwide interest in improving writing instruction and using writing as a scaffold for student learning.

Katie Kyle, team leader, says, “We use the strengths of our individual team members, but we also encourage each teacher to stretch in new ways. We know that, over time, some team members will move on to other leadership opportunities, so we’re always aware of the need to build capacity within our team.”

Once the team has decided on its professional learning goals and plan, team members take turns facilitating meetings. Team members share and rotate responsibilities to give all members experience with various leadership roles.

### THE PRINCIPAL’S ROLE

Even when teachers recognize the need for their involvement in school improvement efforts, they frequently find they are not fully prepared for leadership work. Leadership within a teacher learning team requires specialized knowledge and abilities.

Effective participation in instructional improvement requires that teachers have a repertoire of collaborative skills and an understanding of school improvement processes (Troen & Boles, 2012). School administrators play a critical role in helping teachers develop these collaborative leadership abilities.

Principals serve as important mentors to their developing teacher leaders. They provide coaching assistance as these novice leaders encounter challenging leadership situations. Principals can grow team-based teacher leadership by providing three forms of support: Time, touchstones, and tools.

**Time.** Principals communicate their value of team-based teacher leadership when they allot time for teams to work together and spend time helping teachers learn the skills of collaborative leadership. At McWhirter, teams are expected to meet weekly, and most teams choose to meet more often. Extended team time is scheduled periodically with substitute coverage of classrooms and on professional learning day.

McWhirter administrators hold an annual leadership retreat and monthly meetings for team leaders. These sessions are used to address specific leadership skills, including development of team norms, meeting facilitation, goal setting, data analysis, and conflict resolution. These administrators recognize that leadership development is a multiyear process and are, therefore, willing to invest the time necessary for teacher leaders and teams to learn and grow from their experiences.

Moreno underscores this point. “I’ve learned the skills of teacher leadership through a lot of trial and error. Some situations were difficult, but I learned from them. My administrators were there to provide guidance and to push me to grow.”

**Touchstones.** Principals establish the standards for team-based leadership work. These expectations must be clearly communicated and regularly reinforced until they are embedded into

### Books that support team-based teacher leadership development

**Easton, L.B. (2011).** *Professional learning communities by design: Putting the learning back in PLCs.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

**Conzemius, A.E. & Morganti-Fisher, T. (2012).** *More than a SMART goal: Staying focused on student learning.* Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

**Garmston, R.J. & Zimmerman, D.P. (2013).** *Lemons to lemonade: Resolving problems in meetings, workshops, and PLCs.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

**Hord, S., Roy, P., Lieberman, A., Miller, L., & von Frank, V. (2013).** *Reach the highest standard in professional learning: Learning communities.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

**Killion, J. & Roy, P. (2009).** *Becoming a learning school.* Oxford, OH: NSDC.

**MacDonald, E.B. (2013).** *The skillful team leader: A resource for overcoming hurdles to professional learning for student achievement.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

**Troen, V. & Boles, K.C. (2012).** *The power of teacher teams: With cases, analyses, and strategies for success.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

the norms of team life. At McWhirter, the following standards guide teams in their collaborative professional learning work:

- **Team time is learning time.** Team meetings are used for professional learning in support of instructional improvement.
- **Teams use data.** A variety of forms of data are gathered and analyzed as teams identify student and team learning goals and evaluate their progress towards these goals.
- **Teams generate and share professional knowledge.** Team members reflect, question, and dialogue as they learn together. They regularly spend time observing in each other’s classrooms.
- **Teams recognize that learning involves change.** Team members support each other in refining teaching practices and navigating the change process.
- **Teams take collective responsibility for the success of all students.** Team members collaborate to find ways of accelerating the learning of students who are not yet meeting grade-level standards.

McWhirter administrators help teacher teams internalize standards for collaborative professional learning and teamwork by attending team meetings and providing feedback about the alignment of their leadership activities with these standards. Administrators used the Learning School Innovation Configuration map from the book *Becoming a Learning School* (Killion & Roy, 2009) to design simple meeting observation checklists that provide teams with feedback about their team processes.

**Tools.** Teacher teams need to have structures and processes in place if they are to remain focused on instructional improvement and use their time efficiently. Principals can support teams by providing tools and resources that help to build team processes and strengthen outcomes such as:

- Formats for team agendas and minutes;
- Structures for goal setting and progress monitoring;
- Protocols for team discussions;
- Designs for team-based professional learning; and
- Professional learning resources (articles, videos, books, outside experts).

At McWhirter, specific tools are introduced and discussed in monthly team leader meetings so that team leaders are comfortable using these tools with their teams. McWhirter relies on the SMART goal process (Conzemius & Morganti-Fisher, 2012) to guide and focus team efforts across the school year.

At the beginning of each quarter, teams establish goals that meet SMART criteria (specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound) for student learning in reading and mathematics. Throughout the quarter, they gather data to measure their progress towards these goals. Teams' accomplishments are reported and celebrated at faculty meetings.

Each semester, teams also establish their own professional learning goals and develop professional learning plans to achieve these goals. The 4th-grade team continues to focus on strengthening its instructional practice in writing. Recently, teachers videotaped themselves teaching writing minilessons and then worked in pairs to observe these videotaped lessons and offer each other feedback using an observation protocol developed with the literacy coach.

Teams know that a portion of the school's professional learning budget is set aside for their use and that they may request funding for resources to support team professional learning goals. Teams are encouraged to invite the school's instructional coaches and others with specialized knowledge to their meetings as consultants.

See p. 57 for a list of books that provide principals with strategies and tools for supporting teacher leadership in learning teams.

#### 'WE'RE ALL LEADERS'

"On our team, we're all leaders. We each do whatever we can to help all of our students grow," teacher Daisy Rivas explained to a teacher who would be joining the team at the start of the new school year.

McWhirter's learning team members have redefined the role of teacher to include shared responsibility for the success of students across classrooms, their colleagues, and the school as a whole. They have reshaped the work of teaching to include ongoing professional learning to continually improve student learning.

The challenges faced by today's schools are overwhelmingly

complex and too difficult to be solved by dedicated teachers working in isolation (Reeves, 2008). If school improvement efforts are to succeed, teachers must redefine their roles to include shared responsibility for school leadership.

The 4th-grade teacher learning team, along with other McWhirter teams, plays a central role in school leadership because these teachers see themselves as leaders and choose to join hands with colleagues in efforts to improve student learning through ongoing professional learning. Their collaborative teacher leadership exemplifies Learning Forward's vision: "Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves."

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