



# TOP 10 LEARNING NEEDS *for* TEACHER LEADERS

By Stephen P. Gordon, Jennifer Jacobs, and Rachel Solis

**O**ur rapidly changing world and the increasingly complex demands placed on schools because of that change has led to an increasing awareness that the school principal alone cannot provide all of the leadership necessary for school development.

More and more school districts are asking teachers to share leadership responsibilities with school administrators. At the same time, even teacher leaders who are outstanding classroom teachers and committed to assisting their colleagues and renewing their schools still need their own professional learning in order to reach their leadership potential.

Based on studies in which we have asked

teacher leaders about their professional learning needs (Gordon, 2011; Gordon, Jacobs, & Solis, 2013; Jacobs, Gordon, & Solis, 2013) and our own work with teacher leaders, we can make two general statements concerning how teacher leaders feel about their professional development as leaders:

- They greatly appreciate such professional learning, provided it is focused on what they perceive to be authentic needs; and
- They do not believe they receive enough of it.

We have identified 10 areas in which teacher leaders tell us they need professional learning. Most of these needs cannot be taught to teacher leaders in a single, short-term program. Rather, these needs are met through ongoing professional learning.



## 1 INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Teacher leaders' primary professional learning need is ongoing development of interpersonal skills. Chief among these are listening skills — the ability to not only understand the needs and concerns of teachers they work with but also to develop empathy with those teachers.

Teacher leaders also look for professional learning in collaborative skills, which include the ability to bring together teachers of diverse backgrounds and ideas to engage in respectful dialogue and shared decision making. Collaborative skills, according to teacher leaders, also include the ability to recognize and nurture leadership in other teachers and give colleagues credit for their contributions.

## 2 ORGANIZING

Teacher leaders report that their single greatest problem is insufficient time to carry out all of their leadership responsibilities in addition to their teaching.

One way to address this problem is for administrators to assign teacher leaders a reasonable workload with clearly delineated leadership responsibilities and adequate released time to fulfill their leadership role. However, even in schools with such provisions in place, teacher leaders still report that they have difficulty with time.

Thus, time and work management become important aspects of professional learning for teacher leaders. Organizing skills include skills for organizing people, resources, programs, and activities.

## 3 KNOWLEDGE OF CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTIONAL INNOVATIONS

Because teacher leaders often are responsible for introducing curriculum and instructional innovations to other teachers, it makes sense that teacher leaders perceive learning about these innovations as one of their professional learning needs.

Teacher leaders often need to explain and demonstrate innovations to teachers, as well as provide classroom assistance to teachers trying out innovations in their classrooms. The leader needs to develop expertise regarding the innovation early on in the adoption process.

Teacher leaders also need to understand how innovations can be integrated into the existing curriculum and instructional program, other school structures, and efforts to meet accountability standards.

## 4 MENTORING

In one national survey (Jacobs, Gordon, & Solis, 2013), more than 60% of teacher leaders were assigned to mentor beginning teachers as one of their responsibilities. Many other teacher leaders assist new teachers even if they are not assigned to the beginners as formal mentors.

It is no surprise, then, that teacher leaders cite the need for professional learning in mentoring knowledge and skills. Topics might include orientation of new teachers to the school and community, preparing the beginner for the first weeks of teaching, understanding typical problems experienced by beginners, and

ongoing mentoring.

In addition, teacher leaders could benefit from learning to mentor experienced but still developing teachers, which requires a different approach.

## 5 GROUP PROCESS

A good part of teacher leaders' work involves leading groups in instructional team meetings, professional learning communities, and curriculum development. Most teacher leaders we surveyed feel they possess inadequate group process skills and need professional learning on topics such as:

- The phases of group development and how to facilitate groups through those phases;
- Roles necessary for effective group process;
- Dealing with dysfunctional group members; and
- Addressing group conflict.

Planning for meetings, facilitating group decision making, group problem solving, and group self-assessment are other important areas to be addressed.

## 6 TECHNOLOGY

Teacher leaders report the need for learning in three different areas of technology:

- **Assisting teachers with using technology for classroom instruction.** This appears to be particularly challenging with older teachers who lack experience with technology.
- **Using technology to provide instructional assistance to teachers.** Such instructional assistance might mean using technology to collect or analyze classroom observation data for an individual teacher or using technology as part of professional learning for a group.
- **Using technology to manage, analyze, and share student performance data.**

If the technology is new to a teacher leader charged with introducing it to others, professional learning first needs to cover how to use the technology, then how to best acquaint colleagues with the technology.

## 7 FACILITATING CHANGE

Teacher leaders often are asked to lead change efforts, yet they tend to have very little professional learning on how to do so. To be successful change agents, teacher leaders need to understand:

- How to establish communication networks to facilitate change (Bain, 2007);
- How to promote organizational readiness for change (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2014);

- Individual stages of concern about the change and how to help teachers progress through those stages (Hall & Hord, 2006);
- How the change will affect other aspects of the school as a system; and
- How the change can be implemented in a way that contributes to the school's capacity for continuous development.

Stiegelbauer (2008) reminds us that each major school change "requires change in behaviors, skills, attitudes, and, frequently, ways that people work with one another. Each of these is a kind of innovation in itself and a reason that change is always complex" (p. 122).

It is no wonder, then, that teacher leaders tell us that if they are going to be asked to assume major roles in implementing school change, they need ongoing professional learning on how to facilitate change.

## 8 TRAINING AND COACHING

Teacher leaders quickly realize that engaging in professional learning with teachers is not the same as teaching children, and therefore they need better understanding of adult development and adult learning.

Many teacher leaders report feeling less comfortable presenting to a group of teachers than working with individuals and recognize the need to develop better skills for making oral presentations, conducting group demonstrations, and leading workshops.

To improve their work with individuals, teacher leaders say they most want to improve their coaching skills, which include classroom observation, data analysis, and conferencing. Teacher leaders tell us they are particularly interested in learning how to better use observation data and conferencing to help teachers come to their own conclusions about areas of teaching in which they need to improve.

## 9 LEADING REFLECTIVE INQUIRY

Despite strong evidence that reflective inquiry improves teaching and schools (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009; Gordon, 2008), most of the teacher leaders we have surveyed and interviewed do not report assisting individuals or groups in that process or possessing the capacity to do so.

Although teacher leaders regularly gather student achievement and classroom observation data, our research indicates that most teacher leaders do not assist colleagues in full-fledged action research, lesson study, teacher portfolio development, reflective writing, or other reflective inquiry formats.

Teacher leaders could benefit from professional learning in this area on several levels:

- Teacher leaders who do not feel comfortable with reflective inquiry need to develop their own skills in selecting a focus of inquiry, gathering data on the focus area, developing an action plan, implementing the plan, gathering assessment data, and reflecting on their actions during each stage of the inquiry process.
- Teacher leaders also need to develop knowledge about different reflective inquiry formats (action research, lesson study, and so on).
- Teacher leaders need to develop skills for facilitating other teachers' reflective inquiry and engaging in reflective dialogue with teachers before, during, and after reflective inquiry efforts.

## 10 ADDRESSING DIVERSITY

The single most disappointing result of our surveys and interviews of teacher leaders is that the majority do not feel competent to help other teachers to be culturally responsive to students of color and students with a first language other than English.

Professional learning for teacher leaders in this area needs to begin with helping them to become culturally responsive by learning about culture in general, other cultures, and the negative effects on students of culturally insensitive schools, curriculum, and teaching. Additionally, teacher leaders need to learn how to incorporate into their curriculum and teaching the assets that students of diverse cultures bring to school and how to collaborate with parents and the community in the education of diverse groups.

Next, teacher leaders need to learn strategies for helping other teachers to develop cultural responsiveness. Such strategies include cultural autobiography, equity workshops, cross-cultural interviews, diversity panels (Brown, 2004), culturally focused dialogue (Murtadha-Watts & Stoughton, 2004), readings and videos on equity, analysis of disaggregated student achievement data, cultural analysis of the school's curriculum, and action research for improved cultural responsiveness.

This type of professional learning — first for teacher leaders and then for other teachers — is perhaps the most complex but also the most important development in which teacher leaders can be involved.

### LEARNING DESIGNS

We have outlined what teacher leaders tell us they need to learn to be successful leaders, but what about the structure and design of professional learning for teacher leaders?

Although we are strong proponents of site-based professional learning for teachers, general professional learning for teacher leaders is probably best done at the district level, where teacher leaders from different schools can engage in common skill-building activities, reflection, and dialogue.

The variety of topics cannot be addressed in a short-term program. Teacher leaders need long-term, ongoing professional learning. Moreover, the variety of learning needs teacher leaders report are best met through multiple professional learning designs, with particular activities (and often combinations of activities) matched with different learning needs.

Activities such as demonstrations, skill practice with coaching, simulations, role plays, panel discussions, reflective writing, collaborative inquiry, dialogue, field trips to schools where successful teacher leadership is taking place, and project-based learning are appropriate for different types and stages of professional learning for teacher leaders.

Because each school is unique, and teacher leaders' responsibilities often vary from school to school, teacher leaders also need ongoing professional learning and support at the school level. School administrators and experienced teacher leaders can facilitate job-embedded professional learning for less-experienced teacher leaders through mentoring.

Teacher leaders tell us they learn much from dialogue and problem solving with other teacher leaders from the same school. Critical friends from outside the school can visit the campus regularly to advise and support teacher leaders. And teacher leaders can engage in self-directed professional learning through professional reading, individual reflective inquiry, and reflective journaling.

Teacher leaders report that they have experienced tremendous professional growth through attending regional and national conferences related to their leadership responsibilities, especially when they can interact with other teacher leaders from outside their district.

Professional benefits from attending well-chosen conferences tend to be twofold: Teacher leaders learn from others, but also gain a sense of accomplishment and pride from assisting in the growth and development of other teacher leaders. Teacher leader networks can provide many of the same types of professional growth as conferences, with the added advantage of offering continuous support and opportunities for supporting others.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS

Our findings on teacher leaders' professional learning needs have implications for district and school administrators as well. Administrators who want to





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support teacher leadership need to participate in their own professional development to better understand the value, roles, challenges, and professional learning needs of teacher leaders.

For teacher leadership to flourish, administrators must accept the concept of distributed leadership as the best approach to the renewal of schools, teaching, and learning. In addition, administrators must not only provide resources for but also become active agents in teacher leaders' professional learning.

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