

# HOW TEACHERS LEARN TO LEAD

PROGRAMS BUILD KNOWLEDGE  
AND SKILLS TEACHERS NEED  
TO BE INFLUENTIAL  
BEYOND THEIR CLASSROOMS

BY JILL HARRISON BERG

**W**hile many schools are experimenting with new fads and formulas in an effort to ensure that all students receive what they need to be successful, others have begun to look anew at the resources they already have: teachers.

Each teacher brings a unique combination of knowledge, skills, experiences, passions, and talents to his or her school, just as students do to their classrooms. When teachers are able to exchange expertise, challenge each other to meet high expectations, and support each other to meet them, they better serve their own students while also being a tremendous resource for improving the quality of each other's teaching. They become teacher leaders.

Teacher leaders have unique strengths and opportunities for influencing their colleagues' teaching and learning (Berg, 2018). For example:

- Teachers' deep immersion in the subjects they teach means that they may bring more expertise and passion to mentoring and content coaching than school administrators supervising multiple subjects and grades.
- Teachers bring a unique and grounded perspective to team and school decision-making, thanks to their front-row knowledge of students and their families and their firsthand experience of what it's like to implement their curriculum for the students in front of them.
- Their nonhierarchical relationships with colleagues

can give them an edge in shaping school culture, for example in helping colleagues to be more receptive to change.

However, these important outcomes are possibilities, not probabilities. The knowledge and skills teachers need to be effective as leaders largely lie beyond what most learn in their teacher preparation programs. This includes knowledge of how to build community and shared ownership, managing groups, facilitating dialogue, leading professional learning, guiding evidence-based decision-making, systems thinking, communication and advocacy, and self-care.

By expanding our understanding of the varied ways in which increasing numbers of teachers are learning to lead, we're able to envision potential new opportunities for learning and leadership in every school.

It's worth considering, then, what kind of opportunities have been designed to enhance teachers' capacities to influence each other in these powerful formal and informal ways. In 2017-18, I collaborated with a research team at the Consortium for Policy Research in Education to map the landscape of programs and initiatives in the U.S. that support teacher leaders.

By scanning publicly available information about programs that were referred to us or found on the web, our research team identified, inventoried, and analyzed nearly 300 programs in the United States that support teachers to take on new and varied roles (Berg, Horn, Supovitz, & Margolis, 2019).

We found that each of these programs was designed to support teachers to be leaders in one or more of the following three ways:

1. They **prepared** teachers to lead through professional learning designed to help them build the knowledge and skills they needed to be influential beyond

their classrooms.

2. They **placed** teachers in formal leadership positions that gave them a vantage point for guiding their peers.
3. They **recognized** teachers for possessing valued knowledge, skills, or dispositions and held them up as examples for others to follow.

By examining patterns in how the programs provided one, two, or three of these types of support, we defined seven types of teacher leadership programs (Berg et al., 2019; see sidebar below). Each type of program offers valuable support, but, for this article, I am focused on those that engage teachers in professional learning to prepare them: credential programs, fellowship programs, communities of practice, and professional advancement.

We designed our study to map the range of types of programs and were not able to make claims about the proportionate number of each type of program. However, the majority of

programs we documented included a preparation component and provided examples of ways such programs might align with Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning, as outlined below.

### WHO IS LEADING TEACHER LEADERS' LEARNING?

Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning remind us that effective professional learning requires **leadership** that "develops capacity, advocates, and creates support systems for professional learning." Additionally, effective professional learning is supported by **resources** that have been "prioritized, monitored, and coordinated to support educators' learning" (Learning Forward, 2011). Our study showed that leadership and resources for teacher leaders' professional learning can come from many sources.

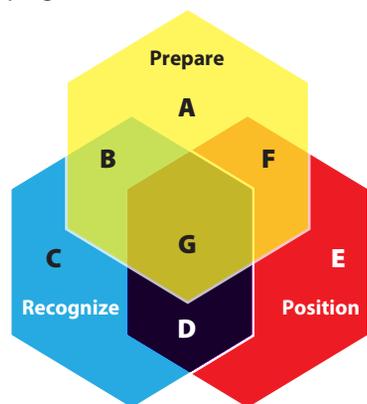
Schools and districts are one source of leadership and resources. They have a vested interest in advancing teacher leaders' learning. The forward-thinking

## 7 TYPES OF TEACHER LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS

Our study of nearly 300 programs that support teachers to take on new and varied roles identified three major forms of support teacher leadership programs provide:

1. Preparation of teachers with knowledge and skills that can help them to lead;
2. Positioning of teachers in leadership roles to capitalize on their expertise; and
3. Recognition of teachers as leaders through awards and other forms of appreciation or acknowledgment.

Each of the identified programs provided one or more of these three forms of support, and patterns emerged among programs that provided similar forms of support. These patterns are described within the report as seven types of teacher leadership programs, outlined below.



<b>Type A:</b> Credential programs	Prepare
<b>Type B:</b> Fellowship programs	Prepare + recognize
<b>Type C:</b> Award programs	Recognize
<b>Type D:</b> Consultancy programs	Recognize + position
<b>Type E:</b> Differentiated work programs	Position
<b>Type F:</b> Communities of practice	Position + prepare
<b>Type G:</b> Professional advancement	Prepare + position + recognize

Source: Berg et al., 2019, [bit.ly/TL\\_Typology](https://bit.ly/TL_Typology).

school or district administrator thinks about building individual expertise in ways that are organizationally useful, and strengthening the capacity of teachers as leaders potentially pays big dividends (Johnson, 2019).

Teacher leader roles that fulfill specific key functions within a school or district are often supported with training, which makes sense. If the role is important, schools or districts should support teachers to perform it skillfully. Some programs build professional learning into the expectations of the role, and they largely do so by bringing teacher leaders together.

More often than not, however, districts do not have the capacity to provide powerful professional learning for teacher leaders, and they turn to education support partners such as institutions of higher education, nonprofit or for-profit organizations, and occasionally civic institutions or professional associations, including unions.

Such organizations bring the expertise and resources needed to effectively build teachers' capacity, allowing districts to focus their attention on matching teachers with roles, creating support systems that extend the learning, and ensuring other resources needed for success, such as time, are allocated.

Individual teachers sometimes turn directly to such education support partners. These preparation experiences can help them build key knowledge and skills and, in some cases, even earn a state licensure endorsement. Teachers do so with the hope of one day securing teacher leader roles but with no guarantee that they will do so. As a result, these teachers may find themselves seeking their own ways to lead. Regardless, teachers are drawn to these experiences in large numbers, often at their own expense, as they are drawn by the love of learning and the experience of learning together.

Teachers also frequently take the lead in finding resources and creating their own professional learning. They

may tap low- or no-cost sources of learning by turning to online sources or networking events (which are often of their own design). When resources are needed, they may apply for grants, fellowships, or scholarships — for example, through organizations such as Fund for Teachers, teachers unions, or their own local university. Such opportunities often bring them into community with others and, in doing so, accelerate the potential for professional learning.

### WHAT ARE TEACHER LEADERS LEARNING?

Since teacher leadership is intended to ultimately influence student achievement, the focus of teacher leaders' professional learning should be informed by what teachers and students need to know and be able to do. To that end, the Standards for Professional Learning suggest, it should be mapped to desired **outcomes** identified in the field and informed by various forms of evidence and **data**, which can also be used to support the cycle of planning, assessment, and evaluation of professional learning.

Programs often prepare teachers for specific roles, whether these are projected future roles or ones in which teachers will be learning on the job. They may be designed to enhance teachers' success in roles that increase colleagues' content knowledge. Literacy and STEM-focused programs, for example, were common in our sample.

In addition or instead, some programs focus on advancing skills and practices needed for specific roles — for example, advocating for equity or leading data use. As long as there is clarity about the focus and purpose of the role, teachers can prepare for the role with specific outcomes in mind, on their own or through support of a program.

Programs and initiatives that are not aligned with specific roles often cast their focus wide on a range of generic leadership skills — for example, as articulated by one of

the existing national frameworks for teacher leadership skill development, the Teacher Leader Model Standards. This framework describes seven key functions teacher leaders might perform and allows program developers to think about what types of skills could be developed to support skillful implementation of each (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2011).

The Teacher Leadership Institute's competencies offer a developmental continuum to guide the progression of knowledge and skill across four broad areas of teacher leadership (Teacher Leadership Institute, n.d.).

The Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession offers a suite of resources, including a teacher leadership skills framework complete with discussion questions and vignettes that invite teacher leaders to unpack and explore the competencies and to do so together (Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession, 2018).

The Teacher Leader Expertise Inventory (Berg, 2018) supports teacher leaders and principals to learn together by identifying essential knowledge and skills teacher leaders need within each component of the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015).

The standards-based outcomes articulated by these four resources allow professional learning to be planned backward and support the collection of data that can monitor and inform teacher leaders' progress.

While most programs are designed with organizational goals in mind, many also aim for outcomes that are valued as individual benefits by teachers.

Programs that bolster teachers' dispositions for reflection and collaboration, for example, help teachers develop a strong sense of efficacy, and those that emphasize the professionalization of teaching have the potential to raise teachers' sense of satisfaction and commitment.

## HOW ARE TEACHER LEADERS LEARNING IT?

Effective professional learning is grounded in “theories, research and models of human learning to achieve its intended outcome” and employs **Learning Designs** informed by these theories, according to Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011).

It is designed with the understanding of learning as a social activity in which members of **Learning Communities** commit to “continuous improvement, collective responsibility and goal alignment,” as well as the research on change to ensure **Implementation** will result in lasting results (Learning Forward, 2011).

Adults learn with a sense of urgency about putting their learning to practice. They want to try on new ideas for size to build their own understandings of why and how new learning is useful (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017; Knowles, 1984).

When teachers already hold leadership roles, they have a ready-made playground for implementing and reflecting on new learning. They may do this on their own or in self-made groups, but programs also exist to help. Programs may provide in-role coaching, offer role-specific workshops, or bring cohorts of teachers together in self-guided communities of practice.

The majority of programs, however, serve teachers who do not yet hold formal leadership roles. These programs tend to engage teachers in alternative opportunities to implement and apply their learning, such as by reflecting on prior experiences, observing current teacher leaders, assuming a role within the program, or designing a special project for the purpose and duration of the program.

These designs, whether grounded in authentic role experiences or not, can support teachers’ continuous improvement when they expose teachers to new expertise and experiences, engage them in problem-solving of shared dilemmas, and

challenge them to reach ever higher in their leadership practice.

Teacher leader preparation programs follow many models, including course-based credentialing programs that offer degrees or certificates, competency-based programs such as microcredentials or the license endorsements in some states, project-based experiences including action research teams and possibly fellowships, or network-based encounters such as EdCamps, conferences, and Twitter chats.

What these varied models have in common is the opportunity for teachers to learn alongside others who have a shared commitment to improve, and, if designed well, they deepen teachers’ commitments to helping each other improve.

## TEACHERS LEADERS’ LEARNING AND LEADERSHIP

The potential benefits of teacher leadership are too enticing to ignore. Why relegate responsibility for improving teaching and learning to only one leader, such as the principal, when every teacher could potentially be developed as a positive influence on the quality of teaching and learning throughout the school?

To be sure, teacher professional learning is not the only condition necessary for teachers to influence their colleagues in positive ways. Other conditions are necessary for teacher leadership to thrive in schools, including a shared vision of quality instruction, collective commitment to the school as a learning community, and structural supports needed for collaboration.

However, these are conditions teachers and administrators can best construct together, and an investment in doing so will pay dividends for years to come as teachers become empowered to take ownership of the responsibility for learning to lead together.

We need more research to evaluate the effectiveness of different types of programs that prepare teachers to lead. In the meantime, Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning

provide a useful guide for lifting up lessons from existing models and crafting powerful new opportunities for teacher leaders’ learning and leadership.

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**Jill Harrison Berg (jhberg@gmail.com) is a researcher and consultant on teacher leadership and systemic improvement. ■**