



Learning-oriented leadership cultivates teacher leaders

BY ELLIE DRAGO-SEVERSON AND CHRISTY JOSWICK-O'CONNOR

In our work with school leaders, practitioners frequently tell us that leading schools while navigating the complexities of current times is too difficult for a principal to do alone. Collaboration has always been important, but even more so now, with all the stresses and unknowns we are facing. In this context, shared leadership is essential.

While scholars have suggested many models of shared leadership among principals and teachers (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Diem et al., 2022; Young et al., 2022), less is known about how to translate models of shared leadership into practice and build teachers' leadership capacity in schools (Campbell et al., 2022; Young et al., 2022).

To meet that need, we created a developmental approach we call learning-oriented leadership that principals and district leaders can use to cultivate teacher leadership in their schools and districts (Drago-Severson, 2009, 2012, 2016).

Learning-oriented leadership is a research-based model of leadership and professional development that posits

that leadership is about developing people. Put simply, it focuses on collaborative learning so that educators can support and challenge each other to grow.

The model leverages four distinct yet interrelated practices for growing internal capacity: teaming, inviting colleagues into leadership roles (to share and lift leadership), engaging in collegial inquiry, and mentoring/developmental coaching. Our research shows that engaging in these intentional processes helps shift school cultures so that educators and schools are equipped to manage today's challenges (Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Joswick-O'Connor, 2020.)

DEVELOP LEADERSHIP WITH INTENTIONALITY

One of the ways this model is distinct from others, such as distributed leadership (Spillane, 2012), is that we focus on ensuring leadership roles take into account the developmental fit between teacher and role. Rather than being assigned leadership tasks, school leaders and other administrators invite teachers to lead in a way that considers their specific strengths and growing edges.

Teachers also experience support as they assume leadership responsibility so that they can better manage the complexity of the new role. This provides a safe and secure space with an intentional balance of support and challenge so that educators can stretch, take risks, and grow their internal capacities (Drago-Severson, 2009, p. 12).

In our work with administrators and teacher leaders over the past decade, we have supported practices and conditions that encourage such

leadership development, especially for informal teacher leadership. Unlike formal leaders — teachers who receive compensation for a titled role such as a dean or department chair — informal leaders maintain classroom teaching responsibilities and assume additional voluntary leadership roles, such as offering advice to new teachers or serving on committee.

In our experience, we have found three components to be particularly important for informal leadership: offering choice, securing resources, and showing up and modeling (Drago-Severson, 2009, 2012, 2016; Joswick-O'Connor, 2020). Here we share practical strategies administrators can use to cultivate these components and help teachers grow so that they can assume greater leadership beyond the classroom.

Offering choice. Leadership cannot be mandated. It has to be a choice, and not every educator wants to assume leadership responsibility. We have found that it is important to ask teachers if they want to lead and what they want to lead. Some prompts include:

- “Would you like to help with ...”
- “When I’m in your classroom, I noticed that you are really strong with Will you help share what you’re doing?”
- “What are you particularly passionate about? Would you like to share that with our team?”
- “I’ll help you spread this great practice.”

Securing resources. For teachers to assume leadership, they often need resources. Resources could include books to lead a book study

or an opportunity to attend off-site professional learning and bring back what they have learned. The most valuable resource is time. Many teachers are willing to help but need the time and space to be able to do so.

That might require the school leader to hire a half-day substitute to cover a teacher leader’s classroom so that they can have time to plan, meet with other teachers, or look at data. To ensure that teacher leaders have the resources they need, ask them, “What do you need to be successful in this role?”

Showing up and modeling. When school and district leaders show up to participate, model, and help, they show their belief that what the teacher leader is doing matters. Whether it is participating in a book study meeting, modeling a lesson at the teacher leader’s request, or being fully present and engaged when a teacher leader is facilitating a faculty meeting, being there and encouraging other administrators to show up can help the teacher leader feel supported and recognized. Afterward, it’s important to celebrate their leadership and the risk they took and let them know the difference they made for the school community.

BE CREATIVE AND INCLUSIVE

Here are some examples of informal leadership roles administrators may offer to teachers under our developmental framework. For each of these roles, we recommend first considering the right fit for the teacher, then nurturing the conditions described above (offering choice, providing resources, and showing up and modeling).

Invite teachers to join committees.

Schools are filled with committees: curriculum committees, parent-teacher committees, school climate committees, etc. Invite teachers to share their expertise and join committees. In our experience, we have found that parents love to hear from the teachers; curriculum and other school-based decisions benefit from the inclusion of teachers' voices.

Open classrooms.

While administrators have the opportunity to visit multiple classrooms, teachers are often only in their own classrooms. Celebrate exceptional teaching that is moving students forward and open classrooms for visitations and learning. Ask teachers if they would be willing to share what they are doing. This could include:

1. Inviting other teachers to watch a lesson;
2. Creating a learning lab by arranging sub coverage so teachers can observe and celebrate great teaching and turn to each other for learning; and
3. Inviting teachers to share their practices in a faculty meeting, professional learning community meeting, or other professional development session.

Host parent information nights.

We know it makes a world of difference when parents partner with educators. Invite teachers to share ways parents can work with their children at home. We have seen teachers lead workshops on social and emotional learning, reading, writing, and math strategies to let parents know what is happening inside the classroom and help them understand how to extend that work at home.

STEPPING FORWARD

The saying "many hands make light work" rings true today. We have found that when school and district-based administrators use a

developmental lens and commit to offering choice, securing resources, and showing up and modeling how to follow their leadership, teachers are empowered to share leadership — and their role makes a significant difference (Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Joswick-O'Connor, 2020).

Empowered teacher leaders not only help administrators but they also increase student achievement (Ingersoll et al., 2017; Louis et al., 2010) and raise efficacy for teachers themselves (Campbell et al., 2022; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Building capacity by focusing on teacher leaders and supporting their development is an important part of the solution for managing the challenges facing education today.

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