

Forging partnerships

A MODEL FOR TEACHER LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Teacher leaders can play an important role in school improvement efforts, but require district support to effectively lead their peers. Partnering with outside organizations is one way that districts can deepen their capacity to support and sustain teacher leadership.

In the current landscape of rigorous standards implementation, teacher leadership is gaining increased attention and interest as a school improvement practice. Moreover, the Every Student Succeeds Act calls out teacher leadership as an intervention strategy, and recent research¹ points to effective teacher leaders as a positive influence on teacher professional learning and on teacher retention.

However, to be effective, teacher leaders need to be well supported by their districts. In this issue of *CenterView*, we describe how districts can foster strong teacher leadership — specifically, we highlight the promising strategy of partnering with an outside organization to help develop and sustain teacher leaders districtwide.

Teacher leader = classroom teacher + peer instructional leader

Without a common definition of teacher leadership among educators and researchers, one can look across districts and find a range of roles for teacher leaders, from student data administrator to school programs coordinator. The Center for the Future of Teaching & Learning at WestEd (The Center) believes strongly that teacher leaders can demonstrate the greatest impact at their schools when acting as peer instructional leaders. The Center defines teacher leaders as classroom teachers who exhibit strong standards-aligned instructional practices *and* who collaborate with peers to influence, improve, and transform teaching and learning. This definition is informed by research from the field² and by our work steering the Teacher Practice Networks (TPN), a five-year initiative involving 38 member organizations helping teachers align instruction to college- and career-ready standards.

By design, all of the nearly 800 teacher leaders participating in the TPN are current classroom teachers. Their ability to speak first-hand to experiences implementing particular pedagogical approaches or new standards-based curricula positions teacher leaders to build critical, trusting relationships with the teachers they lead and support. As insiders, teacher leaders have the credibility to cultivate a safe space for honest, productive reflection about changing practice in a way that administrators and outsiders do not.

The teacher leaders in the TPN are seen as “lead learners” who model a mindset of continual growth. They are focused both on actively improving their own teaching practice and directly helping peers to improve their standards-aligned

1 Wenner, J. A., & Campbell, T. (2017). The theoretical and empirical basis of teacher leadership: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 87(1), 134-171.

2 For example, Wenner and Campbell (2017) conducted an exhaustive literature review of studies from the past decade that examined teacher leaders who both teach K-12 students in their classrooms and lead learning with teachers.

instructional practices.³ The following framework (Figure 1) illustrates how TPN teacher leaders take on one or more teacher leadership roles — with their most influential role as classroom teacher at the nexus of their leadership efforts.

Through these roles, teacher leaders in the TPN influence instructional practices and support peer learning in a multitude of ways. Primarily, teacher leaders facilitate teacher-led learning opportunities through small-group inquiry and lesson studies, large-group professional learning, demonstration classrooms for modeling pedagogical approaches, and one-on-one coaching and reflection on classroom practice. In addition to leading peer-to-peer learning, some teacher leaders also develop standards-aligned curriculum and curate high-quality digital resources to share.

How districts can foster strong teacher leadership

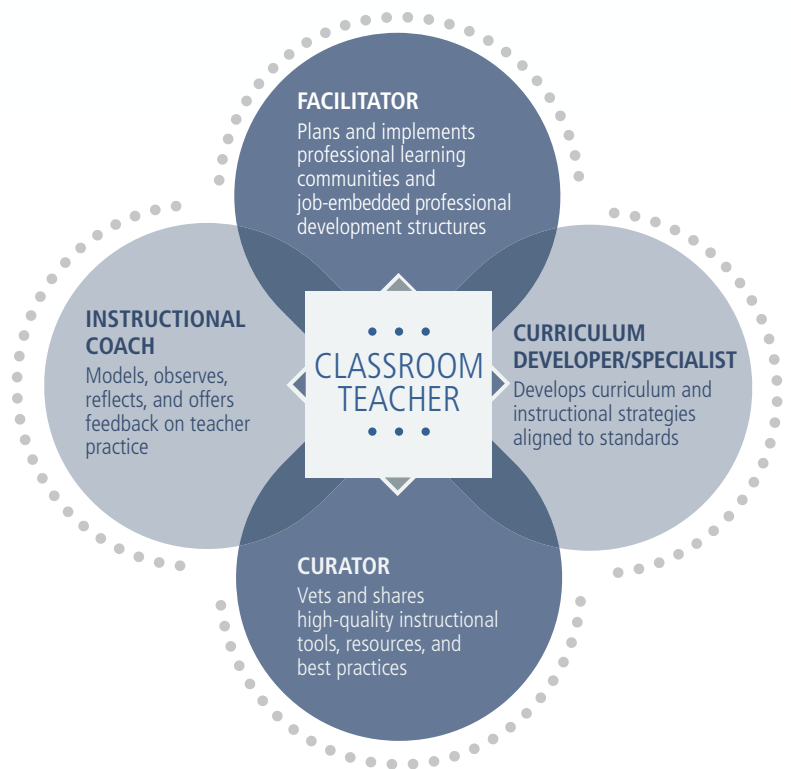
We know from research and experience that effective teacher leaders can benefit the overall school community in a variety of ways, including improving teacher retention; fostering greater receptivity to teacher learning; increasing the school’s leadership and professional learning capacity; and fostering productive, collegial relationships. However, for effective teacher leadership to take root, school and district administrators need to intentionally create conditions, structures, and policies for developing and supporting their teacher leaders.⁴ Administrators also need to provide continuous support for teacher-to-teacher learning experiences.

Based on a body of research⁵ and lessons learned from partnering districts and organizations in the TPN, we identified the following district conditions and practices that enable successful, site-based teacher leadership:

District culture and climate

- Principal buy-in for supporting teacher leaders as instructional leaders.
- Structures that enable teacher leaders to lead peers and collaborate with site leadership teams.
- A culture of collaborative, teacher-led, inquiry-based professional learning.

Figure 1. Framework for TPN teacher leader roles and responsibilities



³ Nearly 210,000 teachers have participated in teacher-expert-led professional learning in the TPN between 2013-2017.

⁴ Poekert, P., Alexandrou, A., & Shannon, D. (2016). How teachers become leaders: An internationally validated theoretical model of teacher leadership development. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 21(4), 307–329.

⁵ In their literature review of studies on teacher leadership from the past decade, Wenner and Campbell (2017) describe the factors that facilitate or inhibit teacher leadership.

- A site-based climate that encourages non-evaluative, peer observation of classroom instruction (enabling demonstration classrooms or one-on-one coaching).
- Open communication between teacher leaders, site administrators, and district administrators.

A formalized set of district practices

- Define clear teacher-leader roles and responsibilities, which are articulated to on-site teachers and administrators.
- Develop a system for recruiting teacher leaders and participating teachers.
- Allocate funds to sustain teacher leadership work (e.g., compensation).
- Provide intentional professional learning for developing teacher leadership skills.
- Allocate and protect time for teacher-led activities (e.g., release time for planning, facilitating, and coaching; dedicated time for teacher collaboration).

Partner organizations can help districts improve support for teacher leadership

When working to develop and support their teacher leaders, districts often choose to plan and provide “in-house,” district-led professional learning due to its cost effectiveness and flexibility. However, there are times when internal capacity — whether district staffing or expertise — may be insufficient. For instance, competing initiatives may have already stretched thin a district’s curriculum and instruction team, or there may not yet be adequate district expertise to support the implementation of newly adopted standards or programs.

Through The Center’s work, we have seen that districts can benefit from partnering with organizations that support strong professional learning and teacher leadership, such as institutes of higher education, not-for-profit organizations, and county offices of education. These kinds of organizations can offer specialized expertise (such as adult learning theory) not inherent to a district; help build internal capacity; or help strategically plan a new program or bolster an existing one.

In the case of building strong teacher leadership, partner organizations can help districts develop a coherent plan that includes defined teacher leadership roles and a systemwide structure for supporting the teacher leadership work.⁶ Meanwhile, districts offer the historical and current knowledge of the sites, capability to implement new districtwide systems, and the authority to change or enact their local policy and practices. Figure 2 summarizes key contributions that need to be made by the district and by the partnering organization in order to collaborate effectively to support teacher leadership.

Figure 2. District–organization partnership: Contributions to support teacher leadership



6 The Aspen Institute and Leading Educators, 2014 (see “Resources for developing and supporting teacher leaders” in this *CenterView*).

District–organization partnerships in action

Following are two examples of district–organization partnerships in the TPN to help improve and sustain teacher leadership in participating schools.

District–organization partnership in action: Chicago Public Schools and DePaul University

In Chicago Public Schools (CPS), DePaul University’s Leading with Algebra (LWA) project has developed 150 mathematics teacher leaders to strengthen algebra instruction. Teacher leaders deepen their own instructional practice through professional learning communities and then share their strategies, resources, and tools with peers to improve standards-aligned algebra instruction. LWA supports collaborative learning cycles for the teacher leaders, in which they focus on how to use formative assessment tasks in their classrooms, analyze student work, and “tune” instruction. Teacher leaders then apply the knowledge they have acquired to lead professional learning for CPS middle and high school algebra teachers, engaging them in a similar learning cycle.

In this partnership, LWA helps CPS teacher leaders grow their capacities as planners and facilitators of professional learning. CPS has been instrumental in recruiting participating math teachers and organizing meeting spaces for the increasing numbers of math teachers who want to participate in this teacher-led professional learning, which takes place in after-school and Saturday sessions.

District–organization partnership in action: Shelby County Schools and Teach Plus

In Shelby County Schools (SCS) — located in Memphis, Tennessee — Teach Plus has partnered with SCS to develop and support the district’s teacher leaders, each of whom guides a cohort of 12–15 teachers to improve standards-aligned instructional practices. Using a rigorous selection process, Teach Plus recruits and identifies a cohort of strong teachers who demonstrate teacher leadership competencies. Teach Plus provides robust training to teacher leaders on planning, facilitating, and evaluating professional learning for teachers, as well as adult learning theory. Teach Plus further develops teacher leaders as strong facilitators through one-on-one virtual coaching and feedback on the teacher-led professional learning sessions. SCS collaborates with Teach Plus to prioritize areas of instructional focus, select teacher experts in these priority areas, provide logistical support, and incentivize teams of teachers to participate in collaborative professional learning.

Whether districts choose to support their teacher leaders in-house or draw on outside expertise to help complement their capacity, having a system of support in place is critical. A district that fosters a supportive climate and implements strategic practices districtwide provides the conditions to grow teacher leaders for positive schoolwide impact.

This issue is part of a series on the Teacher Practice Networks initiative and its efforts to broadly support teachers for college- and career-readiness instruction.

Resources for developing and supporting teacher leaders

Leading from the front of the classroom: A roadmap to teacher leadership that works (The Aspen Institute and Leading Educators, 2014). A roadmap that administrators can use to strategically plan a high-impact teacher leadership system that works within a school or district's unique context.

<http://www.aspendri.org/portal/browse/DocumentDetail?documentId=2402&download>

State teacher leadership toolkit: Created by states, for states (Leading Educators, 2016). Although designed for states, this toolkit includes many helpful resources and examples for district leaders to consider in planning and implementing teacher leadership strategies.

<http://www.leadingeducators.org/state-teacher-leadership-toolkit/>

Teacher leadership: A district and school leader readiness tool (Center on Great Teachers & Leaders at American Institutes for Research and the Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest, 2017). A tool to help district and school leaders plan for training, support, and culture to sustain ongoing development of teacher leaders.

http://www.gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/TeacherLeadership_LeaderReadinessTool.pdf