

Teachers leading the way

TEACHER-TO-TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Our series on teacher leadership continues with a look at how teacher leaders can improve instructional practices through effective teacher-to-teacher professional learning. This issue discusses effective teacher leader-led professional learning, tools to guide collegial conversations about practice, and ways that schools can enable teacher leaders to facilitate instructional change.

In 2015, a study on teacher professional development revealed disappointing news: Despite tremendous investment in resources and time for professional development, improvement in teacher effectiveness is difficult to achieve. The study reported that teacher professional growth plateaus early in a teacher's career, with evidence of minimal continued growth over time.¹

Not surprisingly, however, when teachers are asked what meaningful and effective professional learning looks like, they know exactly what they want. In a 2014 survey, teachers stated that they learn best when professional learning is relevant, participatory and sustained over time, as well as when it is led by practicing classroom teachers who understand the teacher experience.² In a 2017 review of 35 rigorous studies on professional development (all with positive links to student outcomes), researchers further identified that effective professional development also is content-focused and collaborative, models effective instructional practices, provides coaching, and offers peer reflection.³ If we listen and learn from teachers and researchers about what effective professional learning looks like, we can design learning experiences that speak to teacher learning needs, lead to improved instructional practice, and foster a mindset for continuous professional growth.

Teacher leader-led professional learning in the Teacher Practice Networks

In the Teacher Practice Networks (TPN),⁴ the 13 member organizations each partner with a local education agency to develop and support a cadre of teacher leaders who lead their peers in teacher-to-teacher professional learning — which The Center for the Future of Teaching & Learning (The Center) calls *teacher leader-led professional learning*. In this *CenterView* series, The Center shares learnings and guidance about teacher leadership practices in the TPN. This second issue in the series describes sustained teacher leader-led professional learning in the TPN, the efficacy of teacher leaders to improve their peers' practice, and the supports and conditions teacher leaders need to be successful in this effort.

Professional learning in the TPN generally reflects the research-based features mentioned above: it models best practices; involves coaching, participation, and collaboration; and is content-focused, reflective, and sustained. However, while professional learning outside the TPN is often provided by district staff or a third-party provider, in the TPN

¹ Jacob, A., & McGovern, K. (2015). *The mirage: Confronting the hard truth about our quest for teacher development*. Brooklyn, NY: TNTP.

² Boston Consulting Group. (2014). *Teachers know best: Teachers' views on professional development*. Seattle, WA: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

³ Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective teacher professional development*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

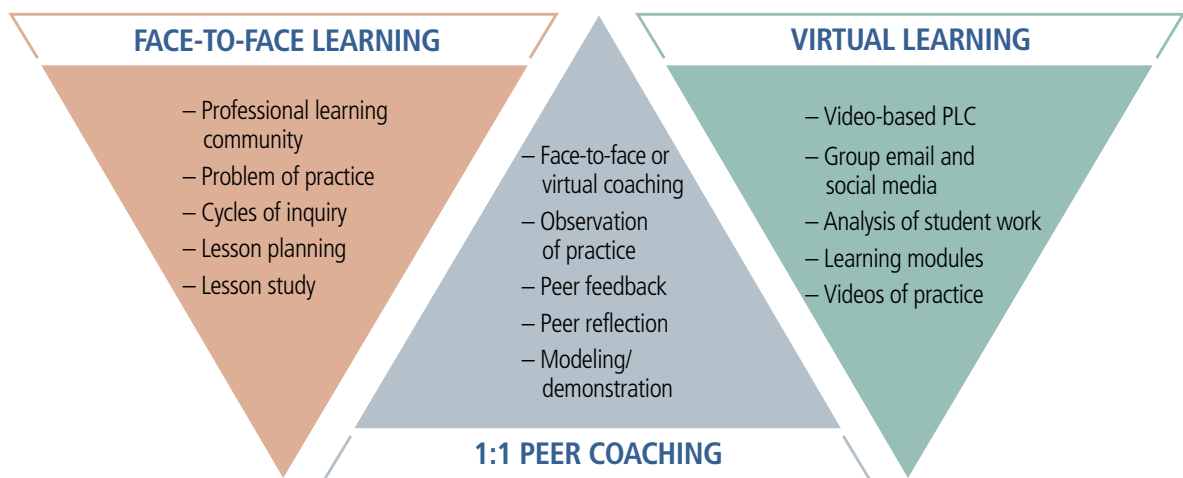
⁴ The Teacher Practice Networks is a five-year initiative funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. See <https://thecenter.wested.org/> to learn more about the initiative, participating organizations, and their professional learning designs.

professional learning is led by teacher leaders who are trained in high-quality instructional practices and who share this knowledge with their peers.

Designing teacher leader-led professional learning

TPN teacher leaders lead colleagues in year-long professional learning focused on improving standards-aligned instructional practices. As a result, the teachers with whom they work learn many new practices targeted at various content areas and grade levels, such as shifting from teacher-centered instruction to student-led discussions in social studies, teaching algebraic problem solving through collaborative inquiry, or strengthening literacy instruction of nonfiction texts in elementary classrooms. Depending on the focus and expertise of the TPN member organization partnering with the district, the professional learning comprises a variety of teacher leader-led learning activities designed to best support teacher learning in their local context. Figure 1 presents a sample of these learning activities, which typically fall into three overarching categories: face-to-face learning, one-on-one peer coaching, and virtual learning.

Figure 1. Teacher leader-led professional learning activities



Professional learning in the TPN is strategically designed to blend face-to-face learning, virtual learning, and coaching in complementary ways that both meet teacher learning goals and fit within the structural constraints of the partnering district. Face-to-face activities that enable deep study or inquiry are balanced with virtual activities that extend learning opportunities for teachers to connect inquiry with practice. At the same time, the design of professional learning also gives consideration to school schedules, district calendars, teacher union agreements, and geographical distances between schools (particularly in rural districts) — each of which may influence the frequency and type of teacher-to-teacher engagements.

There is no one single professional learning model that fits the needs of all contexts. In one district, for example, professional learning involves a teacher leader planning and facilitating two-hour learning experiences every other week, where teachers meet in person to inquire, share, and reflect on instructional practices in ongoing cycles of learning. Between sessions, teachers connect virtually, observing a shared video of classroom practice and reflecting asynchronously on a group discussion thread. In a second district, a pair of teacher leaders lead their site-based peers in three-hour monthly professional learning sessions to model new strategies, facilitate inquiry, and support collaborative lesson planning. In between the face-to-face professional learning, the two teacher leaders observe and coach on-site teachers to refine their implementation of the new instructional strategies.

The power of teacher leaders to positively influence peers

In the TPN, more than 800 teacher leaders bring classroom-experience credibility and professional collegiality to the approximately 12,000 teachers they directly support through teacher leader-led experiences.⁵ As they build collegial trust, teacher leaders are able to encourage and influence their colleagues through learning experiences that necessitate taking risks in their practice. This includes trying new instructional approaches that may push teachers beyond their comfort level, reflecting on those new approaches, and sharing instruction-related struggles. In their non-evaluative roles, teacher leaders are mentors, coaches, and collaborators who are able to create a safe space for teachers to take risks and learn together in authentic ways.

TPN teacher leaders — who are trained in new instructional strategies themselves — test and practice new strategies in their own classrooms in order to develop insight and empathy about the potential challenges of a new approach before introducing it to their colleagues. With this shared experience of trying new instructional strategies, teacher leaders are positioned to connect and engage with their peers in deliberate, reflective learning and open conversations that can lead to transformative changes in practice.

Teacher leader-led professional learning in action: Implementing student-led discussions

As teacher leaders supported by the Constitutional Rights Foundation, Liz and Leslie learned new skills for leading peers and deepening their own practice in civil conversations, a student-centered approach to reading text closely and analyzing the text through small group discussions. Testing the approach first in their own classrooms enabled them to draw on their firsthand experiences when helping the social studies teachers at their high school learn to implement the new pedagogical approach. For instance, they led their colleagues through two cycles of learning in which they collaboratively explored student-led academic discussions — first trying the approach in their classrooms, reflecting on challenges, and sharing strategies, then trying it again. The first learning cycle was eye-opening for teachers, and by the second cycle — although still challenging — the teachers whom Liz and Leslie had been leading realized that with support and practice, students are able to make meaning of complex texts through student-led discussions. The teacher-leader pair had set a tone for the teachers to take risks together, which led to a willingness to try a new pedagogical approach, learn from any struggles, and try it again. As the social studies teachers observed their students improving in their abilities to lead classroom discussions, the teachers gained confidence in the new practice.

Using tools can improve the quality of teacher-to-teacher conversations about practice

A recent study on teacher inquiry found that teacher collaboration is markedly more effective in changing practice when teachers inquire deeply about it in deliberate and intentional ways. The study also found that, with the support of a tool or conversation protocol, the discussion can move beyond “sharing resources and ideas” to more substantive talk that involves “inquiring together” and “reflecting on practice.”⁶

This past year, TPN teacher leaders piloted a classroom observation tool to guide their peer observations and follow-up conversations. Based on interviews with TPN teacher leaders who conducted peer observations, The Center identified the following ways that using such a tool can improve the quality of the observations and conversations that support teacher learning:

⁵ During 2016–17, TPN teacher leaders worked directly with small cohorts of teachers and indirectly with many more teachers to share resources and materials aligned to state and Common Core standards.

⁶ Stosich, E. (2016). Joint inquiry: Teachers’ collective learning about the Common Core in high-poverty urban schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(6).

- Allows for robust, productive teacher-to-teacher conversation — including reflection, discussion, and feedback — about observed practices.
- Provides an objective approach to looking at and talking about practice in a way that is viewed as neutral and not evaluative.
- Offers a shared language for teachers to use in their discussions.
- Gives feedback that is immediate, meaningful, and formative.
- Grants both teacher leader and observed teacher new insights for improving practice.

Teacher leader-led professional learning in action: Conducting productive teacher-to-teacher conversations

Shameeka, an elementary school teacher in New York City, is new to her teacher leader role. Through ongoing coaching support from her district’s partnering organization, Teaching Matters, Shameeka has gained confidence in her leadership abilities. In preparation for using a new observation tool, Shameeka and other Teaching Matters teacher leaders practiced using the tool while watching and taking notes on videos of classroom teaching. Afterward, they calibrated their scoring. Shameeka brought the tool to her third grade team, with whom she had been leading cycles of inquiry and conducting peer observations since the start of the school year. As a team, they decided to focus on a few strategies, try them out, observe the strategies in practice in one another’s classroom, and share their observations. Shameeka’s colleagues understood that peer observations were focused on improving instruction and not for evaluative purposes. She found that having the observation tool improved the quality of the observation process because it provided clear expectations about her “look-fors,” and it significantly deepened the quality of teacher-to-teacher conversations. The tool offered common language for teachers to reference and supported productive conversations for how to improve practice around a specific standard.

How schools can foster strong teacher leadership

In the previous *CenterView*, we identified district-level conditions and practices for developing and sustaining strong teacher leadership; in this issue, we focus on the school level. Based on interviews and surveys with teacher leaders and those who develop and directly support them in the TPN initiative, The Center has identified the following kinds of site-based conditions that enable teacher leaders to facilitate effective professional learning:

Administrative support

- School staff foster a culture of collaborative, teacher-led, inquiry-based professional learning.
- Teacher leaders collaborate with administration to define instructional leadership responsibilities.
- Site leaders communicate frequently with all stakeholders — teacher leaders and the district staff who support them — to understand and advocate for teacher leader efforts.

Teacher leadership training

- Teacher leaders are supported with training and time to develop leadership skills.
- Teacher leaders are trained on how to coach peers, with recognition that adult learning differs from student learning.
- Teacher leaders are provided training on instructional strategies, pedagogy, and specific content areas.

- Teacher leadership development includes opportunities for teacher leaders to learn and process together.

Time and structure

- Teachers' meeting time and place are consistent and protected.
- Teacher leaders have time to practice new instructional strategies in their own classrooms before leading peers.

Culture of growth mindset

- Administrators and teachers cultivate a climate conducive to improving teaching practice in non-evaluative ways.
- School leadership supports peer learning using observational processes and tools for deepening teacher-to-teacher conversations.

Following this issue's examination of teacher leader-led professional learning in the TPN, the series will continue with a closer look at the perspectives of teacher leaders and what motivates and challenges them in their role leading others to change instructional practices.

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. Read the first issue in this series on teacher leadership.

Resources

Teacher Leadership: Teacher Self-Assessment Tool (Center on Great Teachers & Leaders at AIR, 2017). A self-assessment tool for gauging teacher leadership readiness in four domains and for identifying areas of strength and growth.

http://www.gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/TeacherLeadership_TeacherSelf-Assessment.pdf

Igniting the Learning Engine (Education Resource Strategies, 2017). A case study of three districts and a charter management organization demonstrating effective professional learning and the core elements upon which "connected professional learning" is designed that lead to positive student outcomes. This paper also describes how these four systems allocate resources to support professional learning.

<https://s3.amazonaws.com/ers-cms/system/attachments/3560/original/GatesPLv32.pdf?1500306083>