Data-Driven
Human Capital
Strategies

Cultivating Teacher Instructional Leadership Through Professional Learning Communities

Local education agency (LEA) and school leaders can use this brief to learn more about:

• Effective practices they can use to develop and leverage teacher leadership;

• Examples from other schools that have implemented strategies to address this challenge; and

• Resources to support this work in your LEA.

To learn more about teacher leadership generally, see the Career Ladder Guide.

Context

Developing teacher leadership roles is a critical strategy for expanding the instructional capacity of a school, increasing the retention of high performing teachers, and extending their impact on students.[1] Principals engage in challenging work every day—they manage their buildings; serve as instructional leaders; support, supervise and evaluate staff; build and sustain a positive school culture and climate; and engage multiple stakeholders, among many other duties. By developing teacher leaders, principals are able to create a system of support to supplement their work as a leader and ultimately improve student outcomes. Teacher leaders can serve as leaders in PLCs, provide expertise in specific content areas, and support other teachers to improve their practice.

Teacher leadership also works to retain high performing teachers. In a study of teacher retention in four large districts, TNTP identified that providing various opportunities for career ladders helps retain high performers.[2] LEAs could help high-performing teachers extend their reach to more students and improve the practice of their colleagues by creating and supporting leadership roles.[3]

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1 TNTP, "The Irreplaceables: Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America's Urban Schools," (2012), New York: NY, Available at https://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP_Irreplaceables_2012.pdf; Public Impact, An Opportunity Culture for Teaching and Learning, https://www.opportunityculture.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/An_Opportunity_Culture_for_Teaching_and_Learning_Introduction-Public_Impact.pdf

2 TNTP, "The Irreplaceables: Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America's Urban Schools," (2012), New York: NY, Available at https://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP_Irreplaceables_2012.pdf, p. 16

3 Public Impact, An Opportunity Culture for Teaching and Learning, https://www.opportunityculture.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/An_Opportunity_Culture_for_Teaching_and_Learning_Introduction-Public_Impact.pdf

Leading professional learning communities (PLCs) is one proven way to leverage teacher leaders to build the instructional capacity of their colleagues. When designed effectively, professional learning communities can develop the skills of teacher leaders and enable them to share effective practices with other staff. PLCs also enable teacher leaders to facilitate collaborative approaches to addressing problems of practice and improving instruction. In sum, effective PLCs can extend the reach of the most effective teachers, improve the practice of participating teachers, and improve student learning.[4]

Effective LEA policies and practices

Conditions needed for effective teacher leadership:

For teacher leadership strategies to be successful, it is critical that schools create a supportive culture. A school culture that supports teacher leadership encourages and supports relational trust, risk-taking, collaboration and cooperation, collective responsibility for student learning, and a commitment to continuous learning.[5] School leaders should work to develop these norms among staff and should model them during staff meetings and professional learning time. During initial PLC meetings, PLC leaders should model listening to and supporting teachers, being vulnerable, and not criticizing ideas. In schools that have a sense of collective responsibility and commitment to continuous learning, school staff learn together on a consistent basis and there are expectations and support for improving professional practice.[6]

TEACHER LEADERSHIP ROLES

LEAs will need to develop criteria and processes for identifying effective teacher leaders.

In addition to being an effective teacher, teacher leaders should also have the dispositions

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4 Pirtle, S. S., & Tobia, E. (2014). Implementing effective professional learning communities. SEDL Insights, 2(3). Retrieved from http://www.sedl.org/insights/2- 3/implementing_effective_professional_learning_communities.pdf; Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., Gardner, M. (2017). Effective Teacher Professional Development. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

5 Killion, J., Harrison, C., Colton, A., Bryan, C., Delehant, A., & Cooke, D. (2016). A systemic approach to elevating teacher leadership. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward. Available at https://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/pdf/a-systemic-approach-to-elevating-teacher-leadership.pdf; Danielson, C. (2007). The many faces of leadership. Educational Leadership, 65(1), 14–19; The Aspen Institute. (2014). Leading from the front of the classroom: A roadmap to teacher leadership that works. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute. Available at http://www.aspendrl.org/portal/browse/DocumentDetail?documentId=2402&download; Pirtle, S. S., Tobia, E. (2014). Implementing effective professional learning communities. Available at http://www.sedl.org/insights/2-3/implementing_effective_professional_learning_communities.pdf; Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., Gardner, M. (2017). Effective Teacher Professional Development. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

6 Killion, J., Harrison, C., Colton, A., Bryan, C., Delehant, A., & Cooke, D. (2016). A systemic approach to elevating teacher leadership. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward. Available at https://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/pdf/a-systemic-approach-to-elevating-teacher-leadership.pdf

and competencies needed to take on teacher leadership roles within PLCs.[7] These dispositions include "persuasiveness, open-mindedness, flexibility, and confidence," among other qualities.[8] The ability to listen to others, develop positive relationships, continuously improve their practice, and be self-reflective are other foundational skills.[9] Teachers will develop some of the competencies through their leadership activities, but teachers should also have some of the needed dispositions before taking on these roles.[10]

To identify teachers who have effective instructional skills, LEAs can use the observation component of their evaluation systems. To assess the leadership competencies and dispositions of potential teacher leaders, supervisors will need to observe them as they work with their peers, participate in staff meetings, and take on preliminary leadership responsibilities.

LEAs may want to consider developing career pathways that provide graduated responsibilities for teacher leaders. These pathways give teachers the opportunity to take on limited leadership responsibilities and their supervisors the opportunity to observe, support, and develop them to take on greater responsibilities.[11]

LEAs may also want to consider identifying a coordinator or facilitator of teacher leadership who can coordinate and support teacher leadership initiatives.[12] This person could manage the selection and development of teacher leaders and provide resources and technical assistance to schools.

7 The Aspen Institute. (2014). Leading from the front of the classroom: A roadmap to teacher leadership that works. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute. Available at http://www.aspendrl.org/portal/browse/DocumentDetail?documentId=2402&download; Killion, J., Harrison, C., Colton, A., Bryan, C., Delehant, A., & Cooke, D. (2016). A systemic approach to elevating teacher leadership. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward. Available at https://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/pdf/a-systemic-approach-to-elevating-teacher-leadership.pdf

8 Danielson, C. (2007). The many faces of leadership. Educational Leadership, 65(1), 14–19.

9 Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at the American Institutes for Research. (2017). Teacher Leadership, Teacher Self-Assessment Tool, https://gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/TeacherLeadership_TeacherSelf-Assessment.pdf

10 Danielson, C. (2007). The many faces of leadership. Educational Leadership, 65(1), 14–19; Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at the American Institutes for Research. (2017). Teacher Leadership, Teacher Self- Assessment Tool, https://gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/TeacherLeadership_TeacherSelf-Assessment.pdf

11 Killion, J., Harrison, C., Colton, A., Bryan, C., Delehant, A., & Cooke, D. (2016). A systemic approach to elevating teacher leadership. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward. Available at https://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/pdf/a-systemic-approach-to-elevating-teacher-leadership.pdf; The Aspen Institute. (2014). Leading from the front of the classroom: A roadmap to teacher leadership that works. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute. Available at http://www.aspendrl.org/portal/browse/DocumentDetail?documentId=2402&download

12 Killion, J., Harrison, C., Colton, A., Bryan, C., Delehant, A., & Cooke, D. (2016). A systemic approach to elevating teacher leadership. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward. Available at https://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/pdf/a-systemic-approach-to-elevating-teacher-leadership.pdf

Reflection Questions:

- *Which teachers currently serve as formal or informal teacher leaders in your schools?*

- *What makes them effective teacher leaders?*

Resource: The former Center on Great Teachers and Leaders developed a self-assessment tool that defines competencies critical for effective teacher leadership.[13] The tool is based on a review of the literature and identifies competencies in four domains: collaboration and communication, professional learning and growth, instructional leadership, and school community and advocacy. Competencies are also organized by level of proficiency. For example, within "communication and collaboration," an indicator at the foundational level is "developing positive relationships and trust" while an indicator at the advanced level is "group processes, coaching, and facilitation skills." The tool useful for teachers in assessing their own competencies and for LEAs in thinking about the competencies potential teacher leaders should exhibit or develop.

Reflection Question:

- *Are all teachers aware of leadership opportunities?*

- *Do they have access to definitions of the roles/responsibilities?*

LEAs should offer professional learning to help teacher leaders build technical and leadership capacity for their new roles.[14]

Prospective teacher leaders will need formal and job-embedded training.[15] The Center for Creative Leadership recommends "a combination of challenging new work responsibilities (70 percent), supportive coaching relationships (20 percent), and targeted training on

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13 Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at the American Institutes for Research. (2017). Teacher Leadership, Teacher Self-Assessment Tool, https://gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/TeacherLeadership_TeacherSelf-Assessment.pdf

14 Killion, J., Harrison, C., Colton, A., Bryan, C., Delehant, A., & Cooke, D. (2016). A systemic approach to elevating teacher leadership. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward. Available at https://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/pdf/a-systemic-approach-to-elevating-teacher-leadership.pdf; The Aspen Institute. (2014). Leading from the front of the classroom: A roadmap to teacher leadership that works. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute. Available at http://www.aspendrl.org/portal/browse/DocumentDetail?documentId=2402&download

15 The Aspen Institute. (2014). Leading from the front of the classroom: A roadmap to teacher leadership that works. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute. Available at http://www.aspendrl.org/portal/browse/DocumentDetail?documentId=2402&download

new responsibilities (10 percent)."[16] Training should be targeted to teachers' specific roles and responsibilities and may include the following topics: coaching, adult learning theory, instructional strategies, pedagogy, and specific content areas.[17] LEAs may want to combine some training for teacher leaders with those for instructional coaches and assistant principals where appropriate. Leadership development should also include time for teacher leaders to learn and reflect together.[18]

DESIGN OF PLCS

LEAs should clearly define and document roles for teachers that lead PLCs.[19]

While the designs of PLCs vary, PLCs are often guided by facilitators, who may be team leaders or content experts. Their duties may include leading a process to define a problem of practice, developing agendas, and leading the PLC meetings. They may also lead a group of colleagues in reflecting on student work, reviewing lesson plans, and developing content expertise.

Reflection Question:

- *Are teacher leaders effective in facilitating PLCs?*

- *How are teacher leaders developed through the PLC process?*

16 The Aspen Institute. (2014). Leading from the front of the classroom: A roadmap to teacher leadership that works. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute. Available at http://www.aspendrl.org/portal/browse/DocumentDetail?documentId=2402&download

17 WestEd, Center for the Future of Teaching & Learning. (2017). Teachers leading the way: Teacher-to-teacher professional learning. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.

18 WestEd, Center for the Future of Teaching & Learning. (2017). Teachers leading the way: Teacher-to-teacher professional learning. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.

19 The Aspen Institute. (2014). Leading from the front of the classroom: A roadmap to teacher leadership that works. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute. Available at http://www.aspendrl.org/portal/browse/DocumentDetail?documentId=2402&download; Killion, J., Harrison, C., Colton, A., Bryan, C., Delehant, A., & Cooke, D. (2016). A systemic approach to elevating teacher leadership. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward. Available at https://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/pdf/a-systemic-approach-to-elevating-teacher-leadership.pdf

EXAMPLES IN ACTION:

District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS).[20] Excellent teachers at DCPS have the opportunity to apply for a Teacher Leadership Innovation (TLI) Teacher Leader position. These teacher leaders spend half their day teaching and half coaching and leading other teachers. Most of these teacher leaders serve as a content lead for what are called "LEAP Seminars." Through these seminars, TLI Teacher Leaders guide a group of teachers in developing content knowledge, planning, and analyzing student data. For smaller LEAs, teachers could lead content seminars during professional learning days or times while continuing to teach in their classrooms.

Nashville Innovation Zone.[21] Three schools in the Innovation Zone created a teacher leader role that is responsible for leading a team of teachers. Called a multi-classroom leader, these teachers share their methods and tools with teachers in several classrooms, are paid more, and are responsible for the achievement of the students in the classrooms that they support. An evaluation of the multi-classroom leader model in three districts found that the program significantly increased student achievement in mathematics but had no impact on reading achievement.[22]

Resource: Public Impact's A teacher-leader role list and teacher leader job characteristics checklist provides examples of teacher leader roles and defines them. The checklist includes questions that help to clarify the roles and how they vary.

Resource: Teacher leadership toolkit 2.0, strategies to build, support, and sustain teacher leadership opportunities from the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders and Leading Educators is a toolkit that provides resources and tools to help state and LEA leaders design and implement teacher leadership initiatives. The resources can help administrators define teacher leadership roles, identify strategies and models they would like to implement, and monitor and evaluate these initiatives.

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20 District of Columbia Public Schools, "Lead from the classroom! Become a TLI Teacher Leader! Available at: https://dcps.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dcps/page_content/attachments/TLI%20Teacher%20Leader%20Overview%202018-2019.pdf

21 Public Impact: Barrett, S. K. (2014). Metro Nashville's Innovation Zone: High-need schools help teacher leaders with paid, yearlong student teachers. Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact. Available at: http://opportunityculture.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Metropolitan_Nashvilles_Innovation_Zone_An_Opportunity_Culture_Case_Study-Public_Impact.pdf

22 Backes, B. and Hansen, M. (2018). Reaching Further and Learning More? Evaluating Public Impact's Opportunity Culture Initiative. CALDER Working Paper No. 181

School and LEA leaders will need to support the operational design and implementation of PLCs.[23]

LEAs should develop shared values, a common vision, and a definition of success for PLCs. LEAs should also define how they will monitor the effectiveness of PLCs and measure their impact on teacher practice and student outcomes, so they can make mid-course corrections when needed.[24]

Schools will also need to ensure that teachers' schedules provide adequate common time for the PLCs to meet. The PLCs will also need resources—both materials and staff expertise—to support their work. LEAs will need to provide content and technical support to help design the PLC structure.[25] For example, they will need to support schools in developing protocols for PLC meetings and identifying topics for discussion. They may need to provide content support in a particular topic area if the school doesn't have it already. For example, a school may need content support to review and strengthen their Response to Intervention process. LEAs could also seek this support externally by reaching out to a regional service provider, the state department of education, or a nonprofit organization with expertise in the areas of need.

Reflection Questions:

■ *If your schools have used PLCs, who designed them and how?*

■ *What distinguished the PLCs that were effective from those that were ineffective?*

Resource: Leading from the front of the classroom: A roadmap to teacher leadership that works, from the Aspen Institute, provides guidance to LEAs in designing effective teacher leadership initiatives and examples of promising initiatives. It outlines the key phases that system administrators should go through as they as design teacher leadership systems, including the steps to take, common missteps, and questions for reflection.

23 Pirtle, S. S., Tobia, E. (2014). Implementing effective professional learning communities. Available at http://www.sedl.org/insights/2-3/implementing_effective_professional_learning_communities.pdf

24 The Aspen Institute. (2014). Leading from the front of the classroom: A roadmap to teacher leadership that works. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute. Available at http://www.aspendrl.org/portal/browse/DocumentDetail?documentId=2402&download; Killion, J., Harrison, C., Colton, A., Bryan, C., Delehant, A., & Cooke, D. (2016). A systemic approach to elevating teacher leadership. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward. Available at https://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/pdf/a-systemic-approach-to-elevating-teacher-leadership.pdf

25 The Aspen Institute. (2014). Leading from the front of the classroom: A roadmap to teacher leadership that works. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute. Available at http://www.aspendrl.org/portal/browse/DocumentDetail?documentId=2402&download

PLCs should support existing instructional priorities within the school or LEA.[26]

By aligning PLC topics with the school or LEA's instructional priorities, PLCs will have the greatest potential to impact student achievement. For example, a PLC might focus on strategies for developing phonemic awareness if early literacy is a local priority.

- Joel Barlow High School (Fairfield County, CT). Joel Barlow High School serves the rural communities of Easton and Redding in Fairfield County, Connecticut. The school has created a wide range of teacher leadership roles including leading study teams, peer practice coaching, and mentoring to early career educators. Through teacher-led study teams, teachers continue their classroom responsibilities while also facilitating discussions with their colleagues, students, and community members focusing on specific topics that will improve teaching and learning. For example, one teacher led Barlow's Schedule Study Team to reconsider how the school uses time.

PLCs should have a structured process or protocol.[27]

Tools or conversation protocols can lead to deeper, more substantive inquiry.[28] Effective PLCs often focus on examining student work collaboratively and provide time for self-reflection.[29] For example, the Instructional Practice Guide by Student Achievement Partners guides educators in observing instruction. This tool can support peer observation and discussion. The Atlas-Learning from Student Work Protocol is a tool to guide groups of teachers in reviewing and reflecting on students' work to assess understanding of the content and how students are thinking about it. In addition, this guide to using protocols for professional learning includes many protocols that can be used for various purposes such as analyzing student work and examining professional practice.

Resource: Teacher leadership self- assessment tool from the Center on Great Teachers & Leaders at AIR is a self-assessment tool for gauging teacher leadership readiness in four domains and for identifying areas of strength and growth. LEAs and schools can use this

26 The Aspen Institute. (2014). Leading from the front of the classroom: A roadmap to teacher leadership that works. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute. Available at http://www.aspendrl.org/portal/browse/DocumentDetail?documentId=2402&download; Killion, J., Harrison, C., Colton, A., Bryan, C., Delehant, A., & Cooke, D. (2016). A systemic approach to elevating teacher leadership. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward. Available at https://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/pdf/a-systemic-approach-to-elevating-teacher-leadership.pdf

27 Pirtle, S. S., Tobia, E. (2014). Implementing effective professional learning communities. Available at http://www.sedl.org/insights/2-3/implementing_effective_professional_learning_communities.pdf; WestEd, Center for the Future of Teaching & Learning. (2017). Teachers leading the way: Teacher-to-teacher professional learning. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.

28 WestEd, Center for the Future of Teaching & Learning. (2017). Teachers leading the way: Teacher-to-teacher professional learning. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.

29 Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., Gardner, M. (2017). Effective Teacher Professional Development. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.; Pirtle, S. S., Tobia, E. (2014). Implementing effective professional learning communities. Available at http://www.sedl.org/insights/2-3/implementing_effective_professional_learning_communities.pdf

tool to identify prospective teacher leaders, gauge their readiness for leadership roles, and identify professional learning needs.

Resource: A systemic approach to elevating teacher leadership by Learning Forward offers guidance for developing or revising an approach to teacher leadership within schools or school systems. It helps administrators think through four key design components: Definition of teacher leadership purpose, roles, and responsibilities; Creation of conditions for successful teacher leadership; Cultivation of dispositions for teacher leadership; and Assessment of the impact of teacher leadership.

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