



**Data-Informed
K-12 Human
Capital Strategies**

CONTENT GUIDE:

Educator Career Ladders

Educator career ladders comprise one piece of the educator human capital system portrayed here. Local education agency (LEA) and school leaders can use this guide to learn more about:

- The purposes and desired outcomes of teacher career ladders;
- Resources to support this work in your LEA;
- How to address likely challenges, constraints or other considerations when implementing educator career ladders; and
- Examples from other LEAs that have implemented educator career ladders.

Context

Career ladders offer a series of formal positions—which include a change in title and job responsibilities, and potentially a change in compensation—within a school or LEA. Career ladders provide teachers with more varied opportunities to advance than the traditional move from teaching to administrative positions (e.g., school principal). Career ladders tend to focus on offering teachers advancement opportunities focused on instructional leadership, including roles such as mentor, instructional coach, department head, and instructional team lead. They also can include teacher leader roles that involve both direct instructional responsibilities and other leadership responsibilities, such as professional learning support or advisory board participation. These roles typically allow for **highly effective teachers to remain in the classroom full time or part time while also advancing their skills and responsibilities.**

The Demand for Career Ladders

Research on the teacher workforce indicates a desire for career ladders as teacher attrition is linked to a lack of job opportunities often included in career pathways, such as influence, autonomy, and meaningful professional advancement besides moving into school administration.¹ Likewise, schools and LEAs often create career ladders to improve long-term teacher retention and efficacy. These programs can incentivize great teachers to remain in their schools or LEAs because they know they will have opportunities to grow professionally and be recognized for success.

One of the benefits to creating a career ladder—rather than simply developing various unconnected teacher leadership opportunities—is that a career ladder combines advancement opportunities in a clear, coherent structure. When teacher leader roles appear to be a random group of opportunities without variation in the skills or experienced required, these roles can be perceived as more arbitrary and therefore less meaningful. However, when opportunities are organized into a purposeful career ladder with beginning and more advanced opportunities, teacher leader roles may be perceived as more valuable or important. It also is important that the roles in a career ladder be formal (including a change in title and job responsibilities, and potentially a change in compensation) to ensure that they are perceived to be valuable and meaningful opportunities for career advancement.

¹ Danielson, C. (2007). The many faces of leadership. *Educational Leadership*, 65(1), 14–19. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept07/vol65/num01/The-Many-Faces-of-Leadership.aspx>; Ingersoll, R., & Perda, D. (2009). The mathematics and science teacher shortage: Fact and myth (Research Report #RR-62). Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, Consortium for Policy Research in Education; TNTP. (2012). The irreplaceables: Understanding the real retention crisis in America's urban schools. Brooklyn, NY: Author. Retrieved from http://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP_Irreplaceables_2012.pdf

Trends in Career Ladder Design

Teacher leadership opportunities have been expanding steadily over the last several years, yet relatively few states and LEAs have organized these opportunities into a formal career ladder. Other LEAs offer purposefully organized teacher leadership roles but do not explicitly call these opportunities a career ladder. As more schools and LEAs offer a variety of teacher leadership and advancement opportunities, more leaders may recognize the need to organize these opportunities into a formal career pathway.

RESOURCE: The Center on Great Teachers and Leader’s (GTL Center) **Teacher Leadership Toolkit 2.0: Strategies to Build, Support, and Sustain Teacher Leadership Opportunities** includes sections to lead states and LEAs through establishing teacher leadership goals, selecting strategies for teacher leadership, and monitoring progress. This toolkit is quite lengthy, but does provide a comprehensive guide that may assist in this work. A **handout packet** includes worksheets referenced in the toolkit, including example theories of action and role profiles.

RESOURCE: This **slide deck** from EngageNY provides information on “Designing Career Ladder Programs for Teachers and Principals.” It describes points to consider when an LEA is developing a teacher leadership program, including recommendations and tools for communicating about teacher leadership initiatives—and also features Pittsburgh Public Schools as an example.

When designing a career ladder, schools and LEAs can consider existing models of career ladders. There are some common trends to consider across existing career ladders:

First, consider the number of advancement opportunities.

Most current career ladders have three to five levels of advancement opportunities, with the first level beginning with a traditional teaching role. Each opportunity in the career ladder has a unique job title, distinct responsibilities, and compensation beyond that of a traditional teaching role, but may or may not have a unique set of standards or evaluation protocol, depending on the role. Consider the following examples in action:

Example in action:

The TAP system in Louisiana, Texas and other LEAs across the country includes a teaching role, a mentor teacher role, and a master teacher role.²

² More information on TAP in Louisiana districts is available at https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/tap/brochure---recruiting-selecting-and-hiring.pdf?sfvrsn=4364427_3 and in Texas districts is available at https://tea.texas.gov/Finance_and_Grants/Grants/Grants_Awarded/2019%E2%80%932020_Teacher_Leadership_Grant_Program.

Example in action:

The Opportunity Culture system used in North Carolina, Arkansas and other LEAs across the country can include roles such as reach associate, team reach teacher, multiclassroom teacher, and remote multiclassroom teacher roles. For more information about these roles, please see the [Opportunity Culture site](#).³

Example in action:

Baltimore City Public School's [Career Pathways program](#) offers three additional opportunities beyond a traditional teaching role: professional, model, and lead pathways.

Example in action:

District of Columbia Public Schools' (DCPS) [Leadership Initiative for Teachers \(LIFT\) program](#) includes four additional opportunities beyond a traditional teaching role: experienced teacher, advanced teacher, distinguished teacher, and expert teacher. DCPS also offers a [Teacher Leadership Innovation \(TLI\) role](#) that is not explicitly part of the career ladder.

Example in action:

Denver Public Schools' [Teacher Leadership and Compensation \(TLC\) program](#) includes five additional opportunities beyond a teaching role: new teacher ambassador, regional team specialist, team specialist, team lead, and senior team lead. Although these roles are differentiated by responsibilities and experience required, they do not necessarily require a linear career progression.

Then consider the types of advancement opportunities.

Although the beginning opportunities in a career ladder focus on traditional roles, intermediate opportunities in a career ladder often include school-level leadership or mentorship. For example, the distinguished teacher role in D.C. Public Schools and the model pathway in Baltimore City include opportunities to serve as a model for other teachers. Advanced opportunities in a career ladder often include shared instructional leadership responsibilities with school leaders and a greater focus on data use. For example, the senior team lead role in Denver leads a team of teachers in planning and provides formal coaching. Some LEAs are exploring other types of teacher leader roles (e.g., equity coaches in Des Moines Public Schools).⁴

³ More information on Opportunity Culture in North Carolina is available at <https://www.opportunityculture.org/reach/case-studies/> and in Arkansas is available at <https://www.opportunityculture.org/2019/03/14/arkansas-opportunity-culture-pilot-adds-3-districts-and-8-north-little-rock-schools/>.

⁴ More information on equity coaches in Des Moines Public Schools is available at <https://cdn.dmschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/ACTV-Equity-Lead-Stipend.pdf>.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- *What do our most effective teachers (as determined by the multiple measures used in the PA educator effectiveness system) think of the availability and types of leadership opportunities in the LEA?*
- *How can we learn more about their opinions?*

Finally, consider the types of compensation offered.

Most career ladder opportunities include yearly stipends based on the additional responsibilities associated with each role; for example, the TAP program, Missouri Career Ladders,⁵ and Denver's TLC program include up to approximately \$5,000 in yearly stipends. However, some career ladders (such as those in Baltimore City and DCPS) include salary increases.

RESOURCE: The National Network of State Teachers of the Year publication **Creating Sustainable Teacher Career Pathways: A 21st Century Imperative** describes how career paths, differentiated staffing, and salaries can work together to comprise sustainable teacher leadership opportunities.

REFLECTION QUESTION:

- *How will the LEA ensure sustainability for these salaries and positions in the long term?*

⁵ More information on Missouri's Career Ladders is available at https://my.vanderbilt.edu/performanceincentives/files/2012/10/Booker_et_al_for_posting1.pdf.

Career Ladder Best Practices

When designing or refining career ladder systems, schools and districts may consider the following best practices to ensure that their system leads to intended outcomes.

First, gather input from teachers.

When designing advancement opportunities, it is important to ensure that teachers want and value these opportunities. Consider holding focus groups with experienced and effective teachers to gather input on the types of advancement opportunities they would like to have. Consider asking both **questions seeking a priori feedback** (e.g., what kinds of teacher leader roles would you like to have?) as well as **questions seeking feedback on specific examples of proposed advancement opportunities** so that teachers can imagine a full range of possibilities and offer early reactions.

Example in action:

Listening to Great Teachers: A Teacher-Driven Research Project from the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders includes three reports that describe information collected from state teachers of the year regarding professional learning opportunities. LEAs could consider data collection through similar means (focus groups and surveys) when gathering input from local teachers on career ladder opportunities to offer.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- *How will teacher input on proposed teacher leadership roles be collected to ensure all voices are heard?*
- *How can you be sure to include input of novice and experienced teachers; teachers of different subjects and age groups (including teachers of English learners and special education students); and those teaching in a variety of contexts (including in high poverty schools or with high needs students)?*

Second, be transparent about eligibility, hiring processes, and responsibilities associated with advancement opportunities.

Without clear criteria, teachers may not know if they would be eligible for or successful in advanced roles. In schools with challenges of trust and school culture, teachers may have concerns about colleagues being selected for coaching or supervisory roles based on personal relationships rather than merit. Some teachers also may be reluctant to seek out advancement opportunities if they believe they may be forced to take on any extra work that arises over time (e.g., substitute teaching, lunch duty). By establishing clear criteria for hiring and regular job responsibilities, schools and districts can help ensure that the best-fit teachers take advantage of advancement opportunities and build trust in the system.

REFLECTION QUESTION:

- *Are there established processes from teacher and leader recruitment and hiring that can be applied to selecting teacher leaders? How are advanced opportunity roles communicated to faculty?*

A CLOSER LOOK



Design advancement opportunities with impact in mind.

Advancement opportunities should be based on the LEA's established needs and designed to promote specific outcomes and, at the same time, should take into account how the new opportunity will impact on the teacher's already present role and responsibilities. Consider creating advancement opportunities that are designed to directly support the daily work of teachers, such as a teacher who helps colleagues develop and analyze assessments. Alternately, a school or LEA may consider using a career ladder such as **Opportunity Culture's** that includes shared instructional responsibilities.

Next, eliminate duplication.

Introducing new advancement opportunities may inadvertently create a “top-heavy” leadership structure in schools and LEAs, especially if there are already several such roles, such as department chairs, grade-level team leads, instructional coaches, or curriculum specialists. Consider first integrating these roles into a career ladder, perhaps even modifying central office roles to include traditional teaching responsibilities (e.g., interventionist services, secondary course instruction). Ensure that advancement opportunities offer added value to the school system rather than duplicating existing responsibilities.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- *What teacher leadership roles already exist in the LEA?*
- *How are they managed/coordinated?*
- *Is there a way to consolidate the work of coordinating these roles?*

Finally, ensure that career ladders provide a meaningful bridge between teaching and administrative roles.

Many teachers seek advancement opportunities because they want to grow in their careers but are not interested in becoming principals; however, other teachers seek out advancement opportunities because of an interest in potential administrative roles in the future. It can be helpful to ensure that the advancement opportunities included in a career ladder can naturally progress into traditional school or district administration roles for those who may be interested.

Most examples of current career ladders come from large LEAs; however, several small and more rural LEAs (for example, districts using Opportunity Culture in North Carolina)⁶ also have found success with career ladders. Small schools and LEAs may already have expert teachers who are “wearing many hats”; these schools and LEAs can start building career ladders by formalizing the roles and responsibilities that expert teachers already take on. Schools and LEAs (regardless of their size or location) with few to no expert or experienced

⁶ More information is available at <https://www.opportunityculture.org/2019/01/31/three-more-n-c-districts-to-launch-opportunity-culture-with-new-state-funding>.

teachers can begin by gathering insights from current teachers about the supports or advancement opportunities that would motivate them to stay in their schools and continue to grow professionally. These schools also can start by creating advancement opportunities that reflect the strengths of current teachers rather than waiting for veteran staff who are all-around experts to fill career ladder roles (for example, a data-savvy teacher might advance into a data support role, while a teacher with strong interpersonal skills might advance into a social-emotional learning support role).

Overcoming Career Ladder Challenges

One of the biggest challenges in developing and implementing a new career ladder is the pressure to see a concrete impact in the short term. Changes such as career ladders often require school staff to make significant cultural and mindset shifts, which can often take several years to be fully realized. Similarly, pressure to be immediately successful in a new role can prevent people from fully embracing their new responsibilities. Instead, allowing people to “fail forward” and grow into new roles can lead to more confidence and success over time. Finally, because advancement opportunities may be seen as discretionary during lean economic periods, schools and districts can benefit from planning for budget-neutral career ladders up front so that their funding sources cannot be easily reallocated.

(PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK FOR DOUBLE-SIDED PRINTING)

CONTENT GUIDE:
Educator Career Ladder

DEVELOPED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:

Pennsylvania's System for LEA/School Improvement
Lancaster-Lebanon IU13
and
American Institutes for Research

For the full Human Capital Strategies resource series,
visit www.iu13.org/school-improvement