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ABSTRACT
                In Kentucky, the administrative roles of the superintendent
and the principal have received considerable attention from state-level
policymakers since the passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA).
Although there are comprehensive, ongoing assessment procedures for Kentucky
principals and superintendents, there are no state-level guidelines for the
department chair role in Kentucky. This paper presents findings of a study
that examined department chair roles in the midst of systemic reform in
Kentucky--how department chairpersons perceive their roles and how they are
perceived by the teachers with whom they work. The first phase of the study,
a survey of 112 Kentucky department chairs from 28 secondary schools,
elicited 68 returns, a 61 percent response rate. In the second phase, a
survey of 266 teachers from 8 of the 28 schools produced 108 returns, a 41
percent response rate. Department chairs reported a major increase in their
responsibilities but had not established consensus about what their roles
were. Many ranked traditional administrative responsibilities among their
main priorities, with communication responsibilities slightly less
emphasized. Some chairs reported instructional leadership responsibilities
among their highest priority roles; however, teachers did not note this
trend. There was no clear relationship between chairs' perceptions of
emergent instructional leadership roles and the degree of collegiality within
the corresponding department. Teachers said that their needs for "improvement
in teaching" and assistance with "assessment techniques" were not being met.
Department chairs in schools undergoing restructuring and in nonrestructuring
schools did not appear to differ in their perceptions of roles and
responsibilities. In conclusion, teacher-leaders should be thoroughly
supported and their roles aligned with restructuring goals. Eight tables are
included. (Contains 22 references.) (LMI)

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Secondary Department Chair Roles: Ambiguity and Change in Systemic Reform

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Secondary Department Chair Roles: Ambiguity and Change in Systemic Reform

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Systemic reform initiatives have instigated a focus on new types of school leadership roles and participatory forms of decision-making (Russo, 1994; Van Meter, 1994). However, a potentially instrumental cadre of leaders, discipline area department chairs in high schools, is currently overlooked by both researchers and policy-makers. The following exploratory study examines department chair roles in the midst of systemic reform in Kentucky--how department chairpersons perceive their roles and how they are perceived by the teachers with whom they work.

In Kentucky, administrative roles, such as superintendent and principal, have received considerable attention from state-level policymakers since the passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) in 1991. These roles are seen as key to a statewide change process, since one of Kentucky's goals (similar to other systemic reform efforts) is to disperse power and accountability throughout school systems (Holt, 1993). Consequently, we would expect to see a decrease in the use of a top-down hierarchy and an increase in the use of "facilitative power" among administrators (Dunlop and Goldman, 1991).

These leadership expectations are reflected in comprehensive, ongoing assessment procedures for Kentucky principals and superintendents which include performance evaluation in the areas of organizational ability and leadership[1]. However, there are no state level requirements or guidelines for the department chair role in Kentucky. In fact, little attention has been given to defining or supporting the position at any level. An example of this neglect lies in the finding that of the dozens of professional development providers in the state, we are aware of none that offers leadership training for department chairs.

There is already some evidence to suggest that in general, department chairs can play important leadership roles (Wilson and Corcoran, 1988; Bliss, 1989; Hill and Bussey,

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[1] In addition to new performance standards for administrators, the state has recently adopted new standards for administrative certification which will require candidates to demonstrate high levels of skill in communication, management, and leadership.

1993; McLaughlin, 1993.) Herriott and Firestone (1989, p.19) found that departments have considerable control over resources, personnel, and communication, and the chair has "a critical if ambiguous administrative role" (c.f., Siskin, 1995).

What appears to be prolonged neglect of the department chair role in professional development is mirrored in formal research. "Departments are emerging as one fundamental part of the organization of schools which researchers have disregarded" (Johnson, 1990). Despite the momentum of restructuring efforts, the research on discipline area departments in the American high school is still scant with very little attention given to the role of department chairs (Siskin, 1994). The prominent descriptions we do have of departments were developed for another purpose, such as describing good teachers or exemplary high schools, as in The Best Teacher in America (Matthews, 1988) and The Good High School (Lightfoot, 1985).

While the role of the department chair remains largely unattended, this role is unique in its official inclusion of both teaching and administrative responsibilities. The potential of this position is largely untapped and, in the context of systemic reform, unknown, thus creating a definite gap in the transition to more inclusive and facilitative leadership at the school site.

Any appearance of newly emerging leadership roles of secondary chairs in a reform context could shed light on policy and training issues associated with high school restructuring. Will chairs have central roles in restructured schools, given the strong emphasis on collegial planning and interdisciplinary teaching (Task Force on High School Restructuring, 1993; Sizer, T., 1992) or is the position destined to become obsolete given its traditional lack of attention?

What are the noteworthy aspects of the roles of department chairpersons involved in implementing both mandatory and voluntary reform initiatives in Kentucky? In the present study, we undertook a two-part investigation in order to determine how secondary department chairs are currently functioning in reform efforts and how teachers feel department

chairs could function more effectively. We surveyed a representative sample of department chairs concerning general roles and responsibilities. Additionally, teachers within selected departments were surveyed for their perceptions of three areas: actual and desired responsibilities of department chairs, degree of involvement in innovation, and collegiality within departments.

SURVEY OF DEPARTMENT CHAIRS

In the first phase of the study, we attempted to explore two major issues:

1.   How do department chairs see their role in the context of reform?

2.   Do department chairs from the various discipline areas (such as mathematics, English, social studies and science) exhibit differences in role responsibilities and perceptions of role responsibilities?

In May, 1994, 112 questionnaires were sent to department chairpersons for each of the four above-mentioned discipline areas in twenty-eight high schools located in twenty-three school districts in central Kentucky. The Central Kentucky Educational Cooperative expressed interest in the issue and helped facilitate school access. The school districts in the cooperative are generally representative of those in other areas of the state, encompassing urban, urban-adjacent, suburban, and rural Kentucky districts ranging in size from 1,500 students to 35,000 students. The characteristics of these districts are generally similar to other areas of the state.

Department chairs in the four discipline areas noted were selected because the statewide assessment system focuses on these disciplines, albeit to varying degrees[2]. The assessment requires students to develop portfolios in mathematics and English; complete open-ended response items in science, mathematics, social studies, and English; and engage in performance events in mathematics, science, and social studies.

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[2] The assessment system for Kentucky's schools assigned all schools a baseline value of performance based on student achievement in each content area and other data collected in 1991-92. Using the baseline, a threshold level of achievement was developed for each school and progress between the baseline and threshold is reported every two years (Petrosko, 1994, p. 50).

The initial questionnaire consisted of fourteen forced choice items and fifteen open ended response items, and was personally addressed to each department chair.

FINDINGS FROM THE FIRST SURVEY

Chairs were surveyed at twenty-eight of the 310 Kentucky high schools. Of 112 surveys sent to department chairs, sixty-eight were returned for a 61% response rate. The response breakdown among the four discipline areas chairs was as follows: 20/68 (29%) social studies, 19/68 (28%) English, 17/68 (25%) mathematics, 12/68 (18%) science. One possible explanation for the unusually high response rate may be that department chairs were grateful that someone was looking at this issue. For example, these are remarks from several department chairs: "This was therapeutic! (signed name and city)"; "This is like a message in a bottle"; "Thanks for listening, if you did. (signed name and city)"; "I'm glad someone is finally looking at this."

The exploratory data produced a general view of department chairs' roles and responsibilities and also showed some differences between discipline areas. The descriptive profiles below draw from short answer questions ("list your five primary responsibilities"), open response questions ("describe your role") and from demographics of the sample such as years of teaching and years as chair.

Experience and Longevity

Social studies had the largest percentage of longtime chairs (45% for ten or more years), while English, mathematics, and science had less longevity among chairs[3]:

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[3] Years teaching and years as chair were divided on the questionarre into four categories: 1) 1-4 years, 2) 5-9 years, 3) 10-14 years, and 4) 15-30 years. Computations assumed all chairs to be in the middle of their ranges.

Table 1
*Chairs 10 or more years

Social Studies	Mathematics	Science	English
45%	35%	25%	21%

Mathematics and English stand out with high concentrations of experienced teachers in the role of department chair, despite less longevity than social studies for individuals in the role.

Table 2
*Chairs with 15+ years teaching experience

Social Studies	Mathematics	Science	English
55%	76%	58%	73%

We observe that the disciplines of math and English (disciplines with the most dramatic reform mandates, e.g., extensive use of portfolios) have a greater concentration of experienced teachers serving as department chairs. This may suggest a greater perceived need among administrators for the most experienced teachers to serve as chairs these discipline areas. However, our data are sufficient only to hint at this possibility.

The average amount of time spent per week on all department chair activities was 4.44 hours. The range on this measure was large, from several chairs reporting that they work zero hours per week to the several who reported twenty hours per week spent on department chair responsibilities! On this measure, there did not appear to be substantial differences among disciplines.

Table 3
Average Hours per Week Spent on Chair Activities

Social Studies	Mathematics	Science	English
4.79	4.06	4.59	4.39

Primary Responsibilities

When asked to describe and rank their five main responsibilities, 66/68 of the chairs responded. The largest cluster of chairs (30/66) emphasized "administrative" responsibilities. These included tasks such as adopting texts, ordering supplies, allocating budget, and scheduling classes. The next most frequently emphasized responsibilities (21/66 chairs) were "communication" areas such as leading meetings, serving as a liaison between department and principal, and being a conduit for information. Third in frequency of emphasis (15/66 chairs) were tasks relating directly to "instruction" such as curriculum planning, portfolio assessment, and training. These priority differences underscore an obvious lack of consensus about the role of department chair. This pattern of priorities was consistent across discipline areas with the exception of mathematics. Here, the most frequent first choice responsibility tended to be "instructional" (**INS**), followed by "administrative" (**ADM**), and then "communication" (**COM**).

Table 4 shows the frequency with which each category appeared within the first and second stated responsibilities for each content area.

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Table 4
Self-Reported 1st and 2nd Responsibilities
Ranks by Content Area

English		Mathematics		Science		Soc. Studies	
1st	2nd	1st	2nd	1st	2nd	1st	2nd
ADM	ADM	*INS	ADM	ADM	ADM	ADM	ADM
37%	53%	39%	33%	58%	75%	45%	55%
COM	INS*	*ADM	COM	COM	COM	COM	COM
37%	21%	33%	33%	25%	17%	30%	20%
INS	COM*	*COM	INS	INS	INS	INS	INS
16%	16%	28%	28%	17%	8%	15%	15%
		Not reported					
10%	10%	6%				10%	10%

Asterisked items show a different ranking from the general trend of 1) ADM, 2) COM, and 3) INS.

Self-Reported Roles

While the specific responsibilities reported above appear to show the same general pattern of emphasis across disciplines and schools, with the exception of mathematics, almost half (31 of 68) of the chairs said their roles are changing as a result of systemic reform. Most of the chairs used the open-ended response questions to describe how pressures are intense and continuing to increase as a result of reform initiatives. They indicated a need to take on additional activities without any concurrent support and/or guidance for their roles. Examples of the activities included portfolio assessments, management of communication between the administration and teachers, and large paperwork demands. In aggregating responses to several open-ended questions to capture a role definition by each chair, rich and complex pictures of department chairs emerge. Many chairs included

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concerns, questions, frustrations, and visions of "what could be." Holistic coding was used to categorize these responses into the following categories:

Administrator: focused on routines such as selecting textbooks, ordering supplies, managing budgets and scheduling (corresponds with administrative responsibilities--ADM as described above).

Facilitator: concerned with interpersonal factors such as "nurturing" (corresponds with communication responsibilities--COM as described above).

Instructional Leader: concerned with directly supporting instructional quality (corresponds with INS responsibilities as described above).

Transitional: uses language indicating desire to support instruction, without feeling empowerment to actually lead. This category conveys more of the teacher's aspiration than a current role and does not correspond directly with the responsibility categories above.

Summarizing these categories according to discipline area, we found that English and mathematics chairs reported a strong inclination toward facilitation and instructional leadership in how they described their roles.

Table 5
Self-Reported Roles: English and Mathematics

English		Mathematics	
Facilitator	32%	Facilitator	33%
Instruct. Ldr	21%	Instruct. Ldr.	33%
Transitional	21%	Transitional	21%
Administrator	26%	Administrator	11%

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On the other hand, science and social studies department chairs show more of an emphasis on administration, but also contain a contingent of chairs in the transitional category:

Table 6
Self-Reported Roles: Science and Social Studies

Science		Social Studies	
Administrator	50%	Administrator	40%
Transitional	33%	Transitional	30%
Facilitator	8%	Facilitator	25%
Instruct. Ldr	8%	Instruct. Ldr	5%

Some variations across departments in role self-reports were anticipated because of the required use of writing portfolios in mathematics and English as part of the statewide assessment system. The use of portfolios certainly focuses more attention on instructional issues at the secondary department level. Furthermore, the dramatic difference between mathematics and other discipline areas may be explained by the explicit mathematics standards adopted by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) in 1989 and used as the basis for Kentucky's math portfolios. These standards represent a consensus among teachers of mathematics about what students should know and be able to do and offer more clearly defined instructional goals for department chairs than is currently available in other disciplines. For mathematics chairs there is strong consistency between their prioritized responsibilities, i.e., specific job functions (Table 4) and their self-reported roles (Table 5), both of which emphasize a greater degree of instructional leadership than in any other discipline. Furthermore, only 11% of the mathematics chairs envision themselves in the administrator role compared to 26% in English, 40% in social studies, and 50% in science. It is certainly noteworthy to find this instructional emphasis among chairs in mathematics, a discipline in which prominent instructional changes/additions have

occurred derived from the NCTM standards. For example, when reform began in Kentucky in the early 1990's, the use of writing portfolios was new to many experienced teachers of mathematics.

Summary of Findings from First Survey

These initial findings strongly suggest that in the context of systemic reform, the ambiguity of the department chair role persists. However, what we find emerging from this ill-defined, quasi-administrative position is a trend toward an instructional leadership role in mathematics and some possible indications of a similar trend in English. Portfolio requirements may be fostering a greater need for new types of leadership in these disciplines. Overall, almost a third of the chairs (20/68) do appear to aspire to greater instructional leadership.

SURVEY OF TEACHERS FROM DEPARTMENTS
WITHIN SELECTED SCHOOLS

The second phase of the exploratory study was designed to provide a richer context for the department chair data from the first phase of the study. Given the widely varying definitions of department chair roles, we decided to redirect our focus by looking at data from the teachers with whom department chairs work. Since some department chairs indicated possible changes in their roles, we wondered if this would be reflected in some teacher activities. For example, would self-reported instructional leadership activity by chairs lead to higher levels of collegiality, and would these be associated with higher levels of teacher innovation (McLaughlin, 1993)?

Another potentially relevant factor was the introduction of restructuring incentives. In 1994, three years after the comprehensive reform act of 1991, the state provided sixty-four high schools with small grants to pursue voluntary restructuring models. The major areas of emphases within the restructuring efforts involve block scheduling, interdisciplinary teaching and the development of interdisciplinary portfolios (Fischetti, 1995). Consequently, these efforts have strong potential for focusing attention on instructional innova-

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tion and facilitative leadership and provide an opportunity to tease out a possible influence on chair responsibilities and roles. We wanted to explore these issues:

1. How might schools formally designated as "restructuring" vary from "non-restructuring" schools on instructional leadership of the department chair, department collegiality, and degree of innovation at the departmental level?

2. Do teachers' perceptions of department chairs' instructional leadership, teachers' perceptions of collegiality and the department chairs' role emphases relate to one another?

3. Do teacher perceptions of department chairs' current activities coincide with the kinds of support teachers would like?

In March, 1995, a second questionnaire was sent to teachers in eight of the original twenty-eight schools in which department chairs had been surveyed. The schools were selected to form a "restructuring" and a "non-restructuring" group. For this more focused study, the sample was balanced by pairing the four schools which are engaged in voluntary restructuring with schools of similar size and geographic location which are not involved in restructuring.

In each school, all teachers in English, mathematics, science and social studies received surveys coded back to department and school. Teachers were individually anonymous. This second survey contained thirty-three forced choice items and six open-ended response items.

FINDINGS FROM THE SECOND SURVEY

While 61% of the chairs responded to the initial survey, 108 of the 266 teachers responded to the second survey for a response rate of 41%. Teachers answered questions to provide information on their perceptions of several variables: "instructional leadership" of their department chair, "departmental collegiality" and "degree of innovation" in the department, and "preferred support activities from department chair." Measures of these variables were then compared across several dimensions to address our three major ques-

tions in the second phase of the study.

To measure "instructional leadership," teachers were asked to rate the degree of support provided by the department chair on a Likert scale of one to five from "little" to "very much" for each of the following activities: a) planning, b) developing curriculum, c) innovation/improvement in teaching, d) assessment techniques, e) feedback, f) teamwork. Within each department, most teachers had widely varying estimates of the supportiveness of the department chair. Nevertheless, most chairs received an average of rankings between 3 and 3.5 on most activities. This profile of a department chair providing a very average amount of instructional leadership was consistent across all disciplines.

"Collegiality" was measured by an eight question Likert scale index (Talbert and McLaughlin, 1994) which asked for an assessment of teachers' disagreement or agreement- -on a scale of one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree)--for such statements as "My job provides me continuing education and professional growth." Teacher perceptions of collegiality ranged from 2.13 to 4.38. Again, for most departments these scores demonstrate that teachers' estimates of collegiality were "in the middle" of the possible range. The average of the scores was 3.43.

Degree of innovation was measured by a forced choice question and an open response question. The forced choice question asked teachers to categorize the extent of innovation with the categories ranging from a) "occurring within your department as a whole" to d) "just in your own teaching." An open-ended response question asked teachers to characterize the degree of innovation in their departments. Responses to this question were uniformly high, reflecting almost no variation in perceptions of the quantity of innovations. In other words, all teachers perceive that they are involved in a very considerable amount of innovation. Because of the near uniformity of responses, this measure was not useful for comparisons among different groups in the sample. Furthermore, requested examples of innovations were insufficient to suggest any trends although some teachers mentioned the use of portfolios, cooperative learning, and field trips.

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To measure "preferred support activities from department chair," teachers were asked "what would you like your department chair to do more? And less?" followed by the categories of "instructional leadership" activity described above. Seventy respondents of the 108 indicated preferences. The most often mentioned areas for increased emphasis from department chairs were "improvement in instruction" and "assessment techniques."

Restructuring vs. Non-restructuring Schools

There were no indications of difference in any area between the restructuring and the non-restructuring groups on instructional leadership of chair, innovation, or collegiality. This might have been anticipated given how new the schools were to restructuring efforts at the time of the study.

Current Department Chair Role vs. Desired Activities

Teachers' perceptions of department chair activities, aggregated by school and also across the eight schools, showed a fairly consistent pattern of emphases in terms of what teachers perceived to be the most prevalent activity performed by their individual department chairs[4]. Table 7 lists these responses in order from most to least frequent.

Table 7
Teachers' Perceptions of Department Chair Activities

Most	Curriculum Development
	Teamwork
	Planning
	Assessment Techniques
	Improvement of Instruction
Least	Feedback

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[4] This "average pattern" within schools and across schools contrast with the inconsistency of ratings given by teachers in the same department to their chair.

A comparison between Table 7 and Table 8 shows a large gap between a) teachers' perceptions of department chairs' current activities and b) teachers' preferences for increased support from department chairs. This gap is most apparent in the two activities where teachers want much more support: "improvement of instruction" and "assessment techniques." According to teachers, these two activities are less frequently emphasized by chairs than "curriculum development," "teamwork," and "planning." However, all of the activities had some percentage of teachers requesting greater department chair support. It merits attention that very few teachers specified any activities that they preferred their chair to de-emphasize.

Table 8
Priorities for Support Desired From Department Chair

Activity	% Teachers Request More	% Teachers Request Less
Improve Inst.	49	4
Assessment	47	3
Curriculum Dev.	40	1
Planning	39	6
Teamwork	30	7
Feedback	23	4

Relation between Department Chair Role, Teacher Perceptions of Collegiality and Instructional Leadership

We found no clear connection between department chair roles as chairs reported them and teachers' perceptions of instructional leadership by chair. Nor did we find a connection between chair roles and teacher-reported collegiality. Where chairs reported themselves as highly facilitative we expected some increase in teacher-reported collegiality but this did not appear to even a slight degree in the data. One possible explanation for why the data differed from our hypotheses is that for department chairs "highly facilita-

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tive" may mean working with teachers individually rather than in any type of group or team. Further, no trend was observed generally relating collegiality and perceptions of instructional leadership to each other, independent of department chair self-reported role; the correlation between instructional leadership and collegiality was very low at .10.

OVERALL SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1.   Department chairs feel a major increase in responsibilities but have not established consensus about what their roles are. Many rank traditional administrative responsibilities among their main priorities, with communication responsibilities slightly less emphasized.

2.   The social studies area, which has the longest tenure for department chairs (45% at ten years or more), also has by far the highest self-report of priority responsibilities being administrative.

3.   Some chairs report instructional leadership responsibilities among their highest priority roles. Especially in mathematics, and to a lesser degree in English, a sizeable group of chairs perceive themselves as moving into instructional leadership roles. However, this is not a move noted by the teachers within the departments. Also, there was no clear relationship between chairs' perception of emergent instructional leadership roles and degree of collegiality within the corresponding department.

4.   Teachers have clearly articulated needs from their department chairs which are not being fully met. The areas in which teachers seek the most assistance are: "improvement in teaching" and "assessment techniques"; the areas of least concern are "teamwork" and "feedback."

5.   Six months into formal restructuring efforts, there are no apparent differences between perceptions of department chair roles and responsibilities in schools designated as restructuring and those not so designated.

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Implications

Taken as a whole, these findings present a somewhat bleak picture of the department chair as a beleaguered and forgotten entity in the context of systemic reform. While role responsibilities are in flux as a result of reform, expectations of what this role should entail have not been articulated by policymakers, principals, or the chairs themselves. In some mathematics departments, chairs may be redefining the role to include much more instructional leadership. Common to all four disciplines is that chairs and their colleagues seem to share the perception of the chair's role as ambiguous while understanding that it has far more potential than is currently being used. With national interest in high school restructuring burgeoning, sooner or later the department chair role will have to be seriously considered. Hence, this study suggests two quite different scenarios that could emerge in schools. The first concerns the professional development of department chairs, assuming the continuance of strong independent departments. In a recent study of high school departments, Siskin (1994) concludes, "any efforts to improve high schools...cannot ignore the power of departments" (p. 189). Researchers have noted that departments form essential and powerful communities (Little and McLaughlin, 1993). Within this scenario, real and enduring instructional innovation may depend on the principal's ability to catalyze and maintain the instructional leadership abilities of chairs and/or chairs receiving specialized professional development. Schools of education could provide a much needed focus on department chair leadership skills generally and in the specific areas requested by teachers such as assessment and instructional innovation.

In Kentucky, this type of effort would be a highly appropriate response to state policy. In 1994, the Education Professional Standards Board adopted a set of nine experienced teacher standards intending among other things to give clarity to the role of teacher/leader. In fact, the first standard emphasizes teacher leadership--"The teacher provides professional leadership within the school, community, and education profession to improve student learning and well-being"--and includes performance indicators such as curriculum development and group facilitation skills. (Kentucky Council on Experienced Teacher

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Standards for Preparation and Certification, 1994). While these generic skills are vital in every high school, in the context of restructuring we can expect chairs will have considerable responsibility for curriculum development consistent with block scheduling and for coordination among departments to develop interdisciplanary portfolios.

The alternative scenario to strengthening the current department chair role would argue that chronic role ambiguity and long-term neglect of chairs, combined with the demands of restructuring, are sufficient grounds for a truly new form of teacher leadership at the secondary level. This would involve the development of cross-disciplinary teams and the emergence of team leaders. While there is scant research in this area, a study of the Coalition of Essential Schools (Wasley, 1994), suggests that teachers in cross-disciplinary teams have their fair share of challenges, but these are more than outweighed by the benefits.

With voluntary restructuring so widespread in Kentucky and yet still in the incipient stage (Simpson et al., 1995), there is ample room for experimentation with both scenarios. From this study, it is clear that continuing the present situation, with department chairs in a role which overworks but profoundly underutilizes teacher experience, interest, and potential, is not acceptable. Whether as cross-disciplinary team leaders or as department chairs, teacher-leaders should be thoroughly supported and their roles should be aligned with restructuring goals where such efforts are occurring. Future research could focus on monitoring how these roles are both defined and supported over time and could usefully draw on some of the early work in role theory concerning incumbents (Gross et al., 1958) and how complementary roles effect role definition (Getzels, 1958).

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