The Center
FOR COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL
REFORM AND IMPROVEMENT

NEWSLETTER

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TEACHER LEADERS

The Backbone of Sustained Improvement

FACED WITH MYRIAD DEMANDS on their time and energy, teachers often find it difficult to envision themselves as leaders within their schools. Factors such as rigid school schedules, unrelated instructional tasks, and an overemphasis on high-stakes testing make it difficult for teachers to step forward as leaders (Paulu & Winters, 1998). Furthermore, researchers note that teachers are often left out of the loop of leadership in their school, and when they are given leadership roles, they lack the skills that will make them successful (Sherrill, 1999; Zimpher and Howey, 1992).

Increasingly, however, the drive to improve schools demands the active leadership of administrators and teachers. They share joint responsibility for sustaining improvement and providing the best possible educational experience for all children. Research during the last two decades has emphasized that teacher leadership is integral to successful whole-school reform (Conley & Muncey, 1999; Urbanski & Nickolaou, 1997).

This newsletter defines teacher leadership and offers concrete ways teachers can step forward, sometimes out of their comfort zones, into leadership roles.

What is Teacher Leadership?

In most schools, traditional structures are in place that define certain teachers as leaders such as department heads and grade-level team leaders. Many schools also have a leadership team, composed of the principal and teachers who often have been either appointed by the principal or volunteered their services. Although these formal structures are necessary to the efficient functioning of a school, too often they remain the only recognized avenues of leadership for teachers. The time has come to expand the definition of leadership beyond these traditional formats and to encourage all teachers to explore a variety of leadership roles.

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A number of research studies have identified the characteristics of teacher leaders, including the following:

- Collaboration with peers, parents, and communities that engages them in dialogues of open inquiry.
- Risk taking and participation in school decision making.
- Demonstrated expertise in instruction and the willingness to share that knowledge with other professionals, engage in continuous action research, and consistently participate in a professional learning curve.
- Frequent reflection on their work and staying on the cutting edge of what's best for children.
- Social consciousness and political activity (Wynne, 2001).

How Can Teachers Become Leaders?

Teachers can exercise leadership in many ways beyond the traditionally defined areas.

Collaborate With Peers: Facilitate Team Meetings

In grade-level and cross grade-level team meetings, facilitation often is left to the same few teachers. Aspiring leaders can offer to facilitate meetings or take notes, which can later be distributed to colleagues. If the prospect of leading an entire meeting is too daunting, a teacher can suggest: "I'd like to facilitate part of our discussion about visiting each other's classrooms." In this way, step by step, leadership opportunities are expanded from one teacher to more than one. Thus, should the usual facilitator be absent or leave the school, the work of the team does not grind to a halt. The team also benefits from offers of note taking by emerging with a record of its activities and discussions.

Participate in School Decisions: Contribute Agenda Items

The school leadership team is most often composed of a representative group of teachers who ideally report back to their colleagues on the proceedings of leadership team meetings. Teachers who are not part of the leadership team also can demonstrate leadership by contributing agenda items related to sustaining reform, such as "What did we learn from the Writing Prompt that the students did a week ago?" They also can read and respond to meeting minutes. If minutes are not forthcoming, they can ask, "What happened in last week's leadership meeting? What did you discuss?" These teacher leaders contribute to building a schoolwide culture of communication about instruction and assessment.

Demonstrate Expertise and Share Knowledge: Invite Colleagues and Community Into the Classroom

Though often anxiety inducing, opening one's door to colleagues is a true sign of leadership. Some schools have established lab classrooms, designated as places where teachers invite their colleagues to observe, reflect, and provide feedback. However, this process does not have to be limited to officially designated classrooms; it can become part of any school's regular operation, and it allows a variety of teachers to share their expertise. Although it won't happen overnight, teachers can be taught how to be good peer observers and how to provide and accept constructive criticism that helps to drive improvement in instruction. All it takes is a willingness to share and a willingness to learn from others, hallmarks of effective leadership.

Teacher leaders can extend the same invitation to parents and visiting teachers and administrators. This open-door policy is clearly evident at Key Elementary School in Arlington, Virginia, where every teacher's classroom is open to parents at any time, and visitors from around the country regularly appear. Teachers at Key Elementary use these occasions to grow as leaders by fostering good community relations and sharing their learning with colleagues from other schools and districts.

Frequently Reflect on Work: Establish Study Groups or Professional Learning Communities

Study groups provide teachers with an excellent opportunity to reflect upon their practice, learn about developments in their field, and share experiences and strategies—all actions that teacher leaders take. If it represents a radical change, the

study group can be established incrementally. Teachers can meet every two weeks (or even once a month) for an hour, read a manageable article about an academic area of concern, and share one new insight or concept they are committed to trying out in their classrooms. These professional learning communities also are an ideal venue for sharing strategies and insights from workshops or institutes teachers have attended. The leadership skills of the group's members are further developed when the jobs of facilitating the discussion and selecting the texts to be read are rotated.

Become Socially Conscious: Raise the Tough Issues

Influencing what is discussed in schools is another venue for teachers to display leadership. This influence might start with a critical examination of which topics are discussed, and how the precious time in team meetings is spent. Is the team looking at student work and other data with the aim of assessing progress and identifying challenge areas? Are teachers sharing their concerns about the best way to instruct every child? Or are these sessions devoted to a litany of complaints about the same few students day after day?

Emerging teacher leaders don't confine their conversation to instruction and best practice though. They eventually address issues that are often thought of as "the elephants in the room:" equity, culture, power, race, and class. Lipman's (1999) research, for example, indicates that unless issues of power, race, and class are addressed in school communities, the achievement level of African-American students will not be affected by the empowerment of their teachers. Addressing these issues can start in individual classrooms, where teachers can learn and apply strategies that focus on respecting the cultural contexts of their students. Enid Lee, a consultant whose work focuses on race and diversity, points out that teachers who harbor negative assumptions about students' cultural backgrounds can check these assumptions by reflecting, "Is it really deficit? Or is it just different from what we consider normal?" They can then move on to learn more about various aspects of their students' cultures, asking "What is the meaning of these activities in the lives of the students and their families?" (Lee, 2003, p.1).

Leading within one's own classroom is an important first step. But the real challenge is to engage colleagues and peers in thinking about and talking about the diversity of the student body as well as acknowledging and appreciating the differences they find. Lisa Delpit (1992) summarizes the difficulty teacher leaders can expect to encounter as they undertake this challenge:

"We say we believe that all children can learn, but few of us really believe it. Teacher education usually focuses on research that links failure and socioeconomic status, failure and cultural difference, and failure and single-parent households. It is hard to believe that these children can possibly be successful after their teachers have been so thoroughly exposed to so much negative indoctrination. When teachers receive that kind of education, there is a tendency to assume deficits in students rather than to locate and teach to strengths. To counter this tendency, educators must have knowledge of children's lives outside of school so as to recognize their strengths."

Speaking up, asking questions, challenging assumptions—all are bound to spark conversation, a necessary precursor to positive change. In these ways, the changes begun by a few teacher leaders on a small scale can set the example for other teachers to follow.

Conclusion

Teacher leaders not only create and implement reform, they are crucial to sustaining it. With a supportive environment, training, and encouragement, all teachers have the capacity to become leaders in their schools.

Additional Resources

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