

Executive Summary

Getting to Teacher Ownership:

How Schools Are Creating
Meaningful Change



Annenberg
Institute for
School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

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The full report, this executive summary, and supplementary materials are available at <http://www.annenberginstitute.org/publications/GettingToTeacherOwnership>.

Executive Summary

The major reform efforts of the last decades have failed to consistently improve student achievement in our country's highest-needs schools or to close persistent, widespread achievement and opportunity gaps. In the search for remedies, many policymakers, foundations, districts, and educators have focused on teachers. But there is little agreement on how best to maximize the influence of teachers on achieving positive change. Many efforts that focus on individual teacher competence and accountability can overlook important systemic factors. For instance, in this current climate of education reform, one idea, program, or innovation can be quickly replaced with another. When improvement initiatives give teachers little control or opportunity to provide input and are perceived as ephemeral, teachers' ability to carry out the initiative effectively may be weakened.

This executive summary presents highlights from a study exploring the concept of *teacher ownership* and how it can bring about the deep and meaningful changes that our schools need and that all students deserve.¹ Based on teacher surveys and interviews in twenty-one schools in Los Angeles that are implementing major reforms, our study suggests that teacher ownership – a teacher's sense of alignment with an improvement effort and agency to influence it – exists where teachers are able to co-construct knowledge and to influence and lead school improvement efforts. Further, teacher ownership develops when supports and practices are in place that allow teachers to break down barriers and work collectively to build system coherence. Teacher ownership is not built in isolated classrooms.

Rather, it is nested within a school culture that recognizes and values teachers' deep understanding that schools are social and cultural institutions and that values teachers' expertise and knowledge.

Teachers' perceptions of opportunities to build knowledge and to share in decision-making and leadership are associated with a range of positive outcomes, including greater teacher satisfaction and an increased sense of accountability. Teachers feel invested in their profession, their schools, and their students' learning. And students benefit when teachers have ongoing opportunities to learn from one another, practice what they have learned, shape and reshape the work through leadership opportunities, and support the ideas behind the school's improvement strategies.

Overview

Teacher ownership is often mentioned by researchers as a key factor in the success, or failure, of an improvement effort. Efforts succeed when teachers feel it belongs to them and is not simply imposed on them (Ogborn 2002). While ownership is viewed as a "mental or psychological state" that captures teachers' position with regard to the effort (Ketelaar et al. 2012), research to date primarily focuses on the progressive processes by which ownership is achieved, which enable teachers to gain a sense of clarity, skill, and commitment with respect to the change (Fullan 2001). These processes recognize that those responsible for change cannot be viewed as simply the implementers. To achieve school- and system-level change, *all* teachers must share an understanding and commitment to that change. Establishing

¹ The full report, *Getting to Teacher Ownership: How Schools are Creating Meaningful Change*, along with this executive summary and other related materials, is available at <http://www.annenberginstitute.org/publications/GettingToTeacherOwnership>.

understanding and a shared commitment is facilitated when teachers have a voice in creating, shaping, and directing change.

This study builds on previous research by aiming to measure the degree of ownership that teachers have gained in a network of schools within the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) that is working to transform and ameliorate educational inequalities by broadening students' learning opportunities. Through the implementation of one or more of three approaches – community schools, Linked Learning, and Promise Neighborhoods – these schools are striving to ensure that *all* students graduate ready for college, career, and civic life.² While each approach, and each school implementing these approaches, may differ in its implementation strategy, all rely on ongoing opportunities for teachers to share knowledge through collaborative teaching practices and processes, to reflect on what they learn, to shape the work, and to evaluate its impact. This coherent, reflective approach to school change is in stark contrast to top-down approaches that attempt to incentivize teachers to improve teaching and learning through sanctions and measures of effectiveness based primarily on students' performance on standardized tests.

² All three approaches were part of the Ford Foundation's More and Better Learning Time initiative, which focused on building the capacity of schools, districts, communities, and partner organizations to improve educational opportunities in the nation's most underserved school systems. See <http://annenberginstitute.org/publications/time-equity-resource-series>.

³ Please see the full report for full description of methods and case study sites. Schools included the Los Angeles School of Global Studies at Miguel Contreras Learning Complex, STEM of Hollywood at Bernstein High School, and Social Justice Humanitas at Cesar Chavez Learning Academies. Teacher and administrator identities were withheld to maintain anonymity.

⁴ For detailed survey results, see the full report and the methods & instruments section at <http://annenberginstitute.org/publications/GettingToTeacherOwnership>.

Our findings are based on a mixed-methods study that included the administration of teacher and administrator surveys across twenty-one schools implementing these three approaches, as well as interviews and observations at three case study sites.³ We aimed to gain an understanding of teacher ownership of these efforts, how ownership can be developed and maintained, and its outcomes.

Findings

Defining Teacher Ownership

I want to be somewhere where there is a vision and everybody shares it and there is this momentum and people moving in the same direction.

– Community school and Promise Neighborhood teacher

Based on previous research and our findings, we conceptualized teacher ownership as: 1) teachers' sense of personal alignment with the school's overall purpose and priorities; and 2) teachers' sense of agency to influence improvement efforts and create alignment between teachers' beliefs, goals, and priorities and those of the school. We define teacher ownership as a process, mediated by the school culture, and distinct from simple familiarity with a particular approach.

For participating LAUSD schools implementing community schools, Linked Learning, or Promise Neighborhoods approaches, high levels of teacher ownership were identified.⁴ Using survey data, we found that there was a high level of alignment between teachers' own priorities for student learning and their perspective of the priorities held by the majority of teachers at their schools. Regardless of the approach, teachers indicated that their top priorities for students learning were to “create a safe learning environment” and “ensure all students receive needed academic supports.” According to survey results, teachers perceived that these priorities were shared by “nearly all teachers” at their

school. Similarly, there was a high level of agreement regarding lowest priorities. Teachers indicated that ensuring “all students perform well on Common Core-aligned assessments” was their lowest priority of the options provided.

As expected, we found some important differences among teachers’ priorities based on the approach implemented at their school site. Most profound was the extent to which teachers within schools implementing Linked Learning, community schools, and Promise Neighborhoods perceived priorities were shared among teachers at their site. There was a larger gap between teachers’ own priorities and the perceived priorities of the rest of the staff at Linked Learning sites compared to participating schools implementing a community school or Promised Neighborhoods approach.

Teachers indicated that their sense of ownership was also determined by feelings that they could express their voice and help shape and spread the purpose of the school and improvement efforts. Indeed, over three-quarters of teachers surveyed indicated that they felt they had a voice at their school, experienced high levels of autonomy, could make a difference when it came to school improvement efforts, and had the opportunity to help

develop plans for school improvement efforts. When asked a series of questions regarding areas of influence, two-thirds of teachers “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that teachers at their site had a voice in influencing the overall direction of the school (as seen in Table 1). Teachers felt most strongly that they could influence the development of teaching strategies and the design of curricula and instructional programs. Teachers did not feel as strongly that they had a voice in matters such as how funds are spent, the establishment of school-wide structures (including master schedules or class size), and the hiring of administrators and teachers.

Teachers across survey sites also indicated that the administration was interested in their opinions. As shown in Table 1, 80 percent of teachers “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the administration was committed to collaborating with teachers to ensure the school runs effectively, recognizing teachers as experts, having confidence in their expertise, and taking a personal interest in their professional growth and development. Administrative responses to the surveys support teachers’ responses, with close to 93 percent of administrators responding in agreement or strong agreement with the characteristics above.

TABLE 1. Teacher Influence and Teacher Perception of Administrative and Teacher Collaboration (n = 176)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Teacher influence	7%	11%	17%	37%	29%
Teacher perception of administrative and teacher collaboration	4%	7%	9%	46%	34%

Importantly, familiarity with the name of an approach did not signal ownership. Across sites, we found a distinction between teachers' recognition of an approach and their knowledge and ownership of the approach. Survey and interview data revealed that while some of the approaches were better known by name than others, staff members shared how usage of particular terms were not as critical as the concept itself. Indeed, even at schools where teachers expressed a lack of familiarity with the name of the approach being implemented, teachers identified alignment between the direction the school was heading and their own beliefs. Further, teachers at these sites felt that their voice could help steer the school in that direction.

Practices that Support Teacher Ownership

Schools varied in the extent to which they came to identify or be identified with a Linked Learning, Promise Neighborhoods, or community school approach. Across schools, however, teachers shared the view that these approaches were not “top down” or external reform efforts, but were seen more as powerful ideas that required tapping into teachers' knowledge and expertise in order to shape school-wide attitudes, beliefs, norms, and relationships.

Our study identified a range of practices that contributed to ownership and its maintenance, including that which is learned through the practice of teaching, leading, sharing, and spreading knowledge. The development and maintenance of teacher ownership was also supported by a school climate that provided the space and time for teachers to share and spread knowledge and created an environment that allowed teachers to effectively work together to create cohesion and a commitment to

meet the school's goals and priorities. Across participating sites, the following collective practices and processes supported the development and maintenance of teacher ownership:

- **Opportunities to co-construct student-centered knowledge** that extended far beyond particular subject area to include the school context, how to collaborate and work with other adults, how to provide meaningful feedback, and how to shape and lead school improvement efforts.
- **Opportunities for teachers to lead school improvement efforts** and develop positive interactions with one another, providing a venue for continued growth.
- **A positive school climate** that allows teachers to effectively work together to establish cohesion and a shared commitment and to continuously shape the mission, vision, and purpose of the school. Practices such as participatory design, ongoing reflection, professional learning opportunities, and the integration of new teachers contributes to a positive school climate.

The co-construction of knowledge was strengthened and supported by a network that included individuals within and beyond the school setting who broadened teachers' understanding of the approach and assisted them in developing a skill set to implement, shape, and lead the approach. Quantitative and qualitative data revealed that teachers regularly sought out assistance from their peers – particularly teachers who taught the same subject and grade level. When asked why they went to those particular individuals for advice, teachers indicated that knowledge and/or expertise were the most important reasons they reached out. Although 72 percent of teachers indicated that their school had partnerships with external providers, intermediaries, or community-based organizations that provided assistance in meeting the school's priori-

ties, many teachers said that opportunities to extend their support network beyond the school site were insufficient.

Like opportunities to learn and gain knowledge, teachers at participating sites viewed leadership as a broad and collective construct. Approximately three-fourths of all teachers surveyed indicated that they assumed a role or responsibility outside of their primary role in the classroom. In addition, 89 percent of teachers “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they felt encouraged and supported to take on leadership roles. These findings correspond with interview data, as one Linked Learning teacher shared, “I feel like I have clout. I may be fooling myself, but I feel like my opinion matters here. And it’s a small staff. Anybody who advocates for something can make a difference.”

School administrators played a key role in creating an environment that supported shared teacher leadership. At all three case study schools, participating administrators identified as “teacher leaders.” They viewed their role as supporting teachers rather than managing them and prioritized the interactions between staff members to build shared leadership.

Opportunities to co-construct knowledge and to lead intersected through a range of practices and structures that contributed to creating a school environment that fostered collective practices. Across schools, for example, teachers indicated that participating in the schools’ design allowed them to “mold and define” the school’s purpose. More than one-fifth of all teachers surveyed indicated that they had participated in their school’s design and helped to establish the school’s original purpose. Interviewees also described structures that prioritized familiarizing new teachers to the school, its purpose, and assisting in their integration. These structures included hiring committees that enabled various

stakeholders (including students, community members, and teachers) to search for, identify, and hire individuals who demonstrated that they shared the values and beliefs about the learning and collaboration processes upheld by the school. Approximately 60 percent of teachers surveyed indicated that they had an influence in the hiring of teachers at their school site. Intentional efforts to support and retain new teachers, such as teaching schedules that allowed new teachers to regularly observe and learn from veteran teachers, also fostered co-constructed knowledge and opportunities to lead and mentor. Across sites, professional learning opportunities were often teacher-led and seen as a venue to problem-solve collectively, learn and practice a range of skills, and to share in leadership. Finally, teachers across sites discussed the importance of ongoing collective reflection. Structures such as annual retreats, an annual review of the school’s purpose, review of work agreements, and common planning time provided critical opportunities for reflection that allowed individuals to assess their own educational philosophy and values with those of the collective and contribute to their sense of ownership.

Teacher ownership and the practices that support it reinforce each other to sustain a cycle of continual improvement, as represented in Figure 1. The development of teacher ownership relies on a set of practices, conditions, and infrastructures that, in

turn, build individual and collective capacity and thus efficacy. Teacher ownership then influences the development and sustenance of supportive practices and supportive climate for adults in the school, thus reinforcing the cycle.

FIGURE 1. Supporting and Maintaining Teacher Ownership



Why does Teacher Ownership Matter?

Teacher ownership is not only the process of teachers' collective efforts to build knowledge, to participate in the development and progression of the school's vision and purpose, to create and implement strategies that can effect change, and to lead improvement efforts but it is also the product of these efforts. Through quantitative and qualitative data analysis, we found that the process of teacher ownership contributes to a range of critical student-, school-, and system-level outcomes.

Teachers within participating Linked Learning, Promise Neighborhoods, and community schools exhibit high levels of satisfaction within their school settings.

- When responding to a series of questions regarding satisfaction, approximately three-fourths of all teachers surveyed indicated that they “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that their school setting provided a positive place to work – a place where they looked forward to each working day, a place where they would want their children to attend, a place that was supportive and inviting, a place where they felt valued, and a place where they could make a difference.
- Teachers who indicated that they have the opportunity to help develop school improvement plans reported that they could depend on their colleagues, even in difficult situations, at a slightly higher rate than participating teachers overall (84 percent compared with 77 percent).
- Teachers within participating high schools were more positive about their school's climate, staff relationships, and indicated higher teacher satisfaction than their counterparts at non-participating LAUSD high schools. Using the LAUSD School Experience Survey, administered annually, staff ratings for positive school climate were higher (87 percent versus 71 percent) than the average for all LAUSD high schools. The ratings for positive staff relationships were also higher (85

percent versus 70 percent) for survey schools when compared with LAUSD high schools.

Finally, teaching satisfaction was higher at survey sites when compared with the district average (80 percent versus 66 percent).

- Teachers' satisfaction was related to their sense of ownership. We found a significant correlation between teacher satisfaction and collaboration among teachers and administration. Teachers' perceptions of their opportunity to share in decision-making and leadership through collaboration were positively associated with greater teacher satisfaction. We also identified a significant correlation between teacher satisfaction and teachers' perceptions of their own influence in developing school improvement plans and sharing their voice.

Teacher influence in decision-making is strongly related to teachers' professional and personal growth.

- We identified a significant correlation between opportunities for teachers' shared influence in decision-making and their perceptions regarding their growth and development through professional learning opportunities. Teachers' perceptions of their ability to influence decision-making at their school site were positively associated with a greater sense of professional growth through the opportunities provided.
- We identified a significant correlation between teachers' opportunities to assert their voice and co-construct knowledge through their own influence and their growth and development through professional learning opportunities. Higher levels of teachers' perceptions of their own influence were associated with a greater sense of professional growth through opportunities provided.

- Interviews with school staff supported these findings. Staff shared that opportunities to learn from colleagues, to share their ideas (and influence others), and to assume leadership positions contributed to their professional and personal growth. As a teacher from a community school shared, “I wanted to take on more leadership this year. That’s something that’s a challenge for me. It’s definitely outside of my comfort zone . . . but it’s a step that I know I need to take in my personal growth as well as my professional growth. I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to do that here and have support and encouragement.”

Increased Ownership facilitates shared accountability

- Teachers and administrators expressed that high levels of communication and collaboration corresponded with the notion that individuals will act collectively to address concerns and to meet established goals and expectations.
- Teachers and administrators pointed out that Promise Neighborhoods, community schools, and Linked Learning approaches required teachers to abandon all vestiges of the teacher-alone-in-the-classroom model. Teachers had to work with each other and with partners across the community to ensure students’ needs were met. One teacher from a Promise Neighborhood site explained that these collective practices have “engendered a mutual accountability, where teachers, because they rely on one another, have to hold each other accountable towards the same standard of work, and that’s been invaluable in moving any sort of new initiative forward.”
- Survey data revealed that 78 percent of teachers indicated that most teachers at their school site feel responsible for ensuring that all students learn.

Students will benefit when teachers have ongoing opportunities to learn from one another; reflect on what they learn, practice what they have learned, shape the work, and evaluate its impact.

- Across study sites, teachers shared that in order to improve their practice, they recognized and appreciated students’ wealth of knowledge and experiences. Teachers viewed students as experts in their own learning and looked to them to directly influence their instructional practices. Teachers discussed a range of practices – including surveys, written and oral feedback, and student representation on leadership councils – that assisted them and their students in a process of co-constructing knowledge.
- Four-fifths of all teachers surveyed indicated that increasing students’ ability to shape their own education and learning environment and learning experiences was a top priority.
- Based on limited school- and district-level data we found that the graduation rate at participating survey and case study sites was higher than the district’s overall graduation rate in the 2014-2015 school year. Similarly, participating high schools reported a substantially lower dropout rate compared to the district overall. Participating high schools also reported a slightly higher college preparatory on-track and completion rate than those reported district-wide in the 2014-2015 school year.

Recommendations

Based on our findings and previous research, it is clear that teacher ownership demands our attention. If we are serious about transforming our schools, then we must find ways to engage all teachers in the effort – not just as the implementers, but as the creators and directors of change. Our study of schools implementing Linked Learning, community schools, or Promise Neighborhoods approaches demonstrated that teacher ownership necessitates a shift from individual efforts and achievements to a focus on teamwork, collective practices, and joint accomplishments. Improving practice is a shared endeavor. Building a culture of teacher ownership requires the development of collaborative practices within and across schools so that all teachers can contribute to and define the vision of the school and system. When teachers feel as though their voice matters, can influence collective practices and strategies to meet the needs of students and the community, and have greater degrees of autonomy within their school settings, they are more inclined to feel invested in their school, in the community, and in students' learning.

Teacher ownership is a powerful construct with the potential to create meaningful school- and system-level change. In order to support and strengthen teacher ownership, we make the following recommendations:

Support improvement efforts that reduce the isolation of teachers

Teacher ownership takes root in environments where teachers can work together, learn from each other, spread knowledge and ideas, and lead improvement efforts. The approaches that were at the center of this study created a system in which teachers could build their capacity and facilitate their collaborative work, providing room for teach-

ers to adjust and inform based on the needs and interests of students, families, and the community.

- Schools must develop structures such as cross-curricular projects and common planning time that are scheduled during the school day; learning days that allow teachers to observe other teachers in their classroom; professional learning that involves external organizations and providers; and learning retreats that work to reduce the isolation of teachers and improve the quality of instruction.
- Districts must identify and support improvement efforts, such as Linked Learning, community schools, and Promise Neighborhoods, that permit and encourage teachers to collaborate with others across grade levels and subject areas to improve the quality of teaching and learning.
- Districts must support the formation of strong networks of schools that enable teachers to share their knowledge and expertise with other teachers across the network.
- Districts must identify and support improvement efforts that create authentic bridges and relationships between schools, families, and communities. Approaches like Linked Learning, community schools, and Promise Neighborhoods require schools to partner with other organizations to co-construct the school purpose and to meet the full range of students' needs. Providing support for these relationships at the district level helps ensure that all schools can make these connections and that external partners can build relationships with more than one school site.

Create space, time, and autonomy for teachers to collectively define their school.

Ownership – for all teachers – does not develop overnight. The practices that support co-constructed knowledge and shared leadership (e.g., collaboration, reflection, problem-solving) require time. These practices lead to sustainable change and improvements. Ownership is maintained when teachers have a clear and shared vision of desired outcomes and are provided the time to assess their progress towards full impact of the whole-school and/or system-level approach. This is especially important to keep in mind in our current climate of education reform, where one idea, program, or innovation is quickly replaced with another.

- Schools must provide structures that give teachers the time, space, and autonomy to determine if and how particular efforts or approaches fit their schools, based on their context and needs, and to modify and assess school improvement efforts based on the changing needs of teachers and students. These structures are needed for teachers to collectively gain in their understanding, support, and spread of improvement efforts. They can include scheduled time during the school day to work collaboratively or minimizing the number of teacher preps.
- Districts must provide the space for schools to define their purpose. Districts can support schools by identifying and encouraging the implementation of improvement efforts that teachers view as powerful for their students.

Encourage multiple roles for teachers.

Teachers must be viewed as more than just “implementers” of school improvement efforts, but as individuals who can shape, create, and direct efforts. If we are seeking ways to create meaningful school- and system-level change, it is critical that we address barriers to teachers’ learning and broaden teachers’ networks of support to allow teachers, leaders, and schools to learn from one another.

- Schools must provide a range of high-quality professional learning opportunities (often teacher-led) that extend beyond content knowledge or pedagogical principles. Professional learning opportunities are based on what is learned through the practice of teaching and the practice of learning from and sharing ideas and resources with individuals (within and beyond the school setting) who share the responsibility for students’ learning.
- Schools must support shared teacher leadership that moves beyond formal roles, tapping into the knowledge and expertise of all teachers and providing a range of opportunities to use their knowledge and expertise outside of their classroom to assist others and to shape the learning environment. When leadership responsibilities are shared and teachers are involved in decision-making, they report a more collaborative working environment characterized by trust and mutual respect, and identify the school as a place that fosters personal and professional growth.
- Schools must support structures and practices like participatory design, ongoing reflection, a range of professional learning opportunities, and the integration of new teachers that encourage all teachers to shape and lead school improvement efforts.

- Districts must support, encourage and fund school-based professional learning opportunities that view and prepare teachers as both learners and as leaders.
- To give recognition and value to the roles and contributions teachers make outside of the classroom, districts must lift teachers' voices district-wide and develop and support district-level teacher leadership efforts.

Ensure adequate and equitable resources are available.

- Districts and states must ensure that all schools have access to the resources needed to develop and sustain teacher ownership. In particular, attention must be paid to shortages of teachers and lack of support personnel that hinder teachers' ability to look beyond their own classroom to shape and lead improvement efforts and develop ownership.
- In times of economic difficulties and budget shortfalls, districts must re-examine reduction-in-force practices that disrupt the cohesion and collective efforts of schools inequitably.

Evaluate teaching as a shared practice.

Measures of teacher effectiveness must shift from an individual focus to a collective focus. Teacher ownership is about building a collective capacity for change and relies on the opportunity for teachers to learn from and with each other.

- To support and promote teacher ownership, policymakers should identify indicators that signal the importance of the collective practices that uphold teacher ownership within accountability systems. As state departments of education revise accountability systems to meet the new requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), teacher ownership can be incorporated into accountability systems by coupling measures of school climate

(capturing levels of teacher collaboration, trust, and positive teacher relationships) with teacher ownership. Non-academic indicators like teacher ownership underscore the importance of creating learning environments that help students *and* teachers thrive.

- Support research that continues to explore the potential to validly measure teacher ownership.

Further studies are needed to continue to build on our understanding of the potential of teacher ownership. There is still much to explore and understand in order to ensure that all students have access to teachers who are empowered to provide high quality, enriching, and responsive learning experiences.

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