

Teacher leadership works

IT BUILDS, ENERGIZES, SUSTAINS

As we continue our series on teacher leadership, we report on survey findings about the role of teacher leaders and the impact of teacher-to-teacher professional learning on the professional growth of both teacher leaders and the teachers they support. We also offer specific strategies for school administrators who are ready to share the reins of instructional leadership.

Today's college- and career-readiness standards require K–12 teachers to learn new ways of teaching to effectively prepare students for a rapidly changing world. Students are expected to be critical thinkers, clear communicators, and flexible collaborators with their peers. School leaders, who are managing all aspects of a school's day-to-day operations, have limited time to effectively guide instruction in all content areas. Yet, on every school campus there are expert teachers with the capacity to lead — ready and willing to share the responsibilities of instructional leadership. It's time to unleash the leadership capabilities of these teachers and create the conditions that enable meaningful learning to occur for students and teachers alike.

Federal and state support for formalizing teacher leadership has recently emerged in the United States. As of 2016, the U.S. Department of Education has identified teacher leadership as a recommended strategy for increasing student academic achievement. States and districts are encouraged to use Every Student Succeeds Act funds to invest in bolstering teacher leadership opportunities and leveraging the expertise of practitioners.¹ The importance of teacher leadership is also evident around the globe — we need only to look at the many other nations that regard the teacher leader as a valued role and view teacher-to-teacher professional learning as standard practice to improving teaching and learning.²

Learning from teacher leaders and the teachers they lead

At the Center for the Future of Teaching & Learning at WestEd (The Center), we believe that teacher leaders — classroom teachers who mentor and coach peers, as well as facilitate peer-to-peer learning — are what matter most in effective teacher professional learning.³

In spring 2017, The Center set out to understand the perceived growth, benefits, and needs of teacher leaders by surveying the teacher leaders and participating teachers in the Teacher Practice Networks (TPN) initiative.⁴ More than 500 TPN

1 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2016). *Non-regulatory guidance for Title II, Part A: Building systems of support for excellent teaching and leading*. Washington, D.C.

2 Darling-Hammond, L., Burns, D., Campbell, C., et al. (2016). *Empowered educators: How high-performing systems shape teaching quality around the world*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education.

3 For a more detailed discussion on teachers as peer instructional leaders, see *CenterView: Teachers leading the way* (2017). <https://www.wested.org/resources/cftl-teachers-leading-the-way-teacher-to-teacher-professional-learning/>

4 The Teacher Practice Networks, a five-year initiative in collaboration with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, has been advancing K–12 instruction aligned to college- and career-readiness standards through the efforts of teacher leadership. A total of 35 professional organizations have participated since 2013. Currently, 13 organizations in the TPN partner with schools and districts in rural, urban, and suburban areas to develop and support 788 teacher leaders in leading more than 12,000 participating teachers in sustained, teacher-to-teacher professional learning. The Center surveyed TPN teacher leaders and the teachers they led in separate surveys at the end of the 2016–17 school year.

teacher leaders and a sample of more than 2,500 teachers, whom the TPN teacher leaders supported, responded to a survey about their experiences participating in sustained, teacher-to-teacher professional learning during the 2016–17 academic year.

We wanted to learn from teachers themselves about why teacher leadership matters, so we designed surveys to answer these overarching questions:

- How does teacher leadership elevate professionalism and improve school culture?
- What benefits do teacher leaders provide, according to the teachers they lead?
- What critical supports must school leaders provide to sustain effective teacher leadership?

Teacher leadership elevates professionalism and improves school culture

As TPN teacher leaders are supporting other teachers in professional learning, they are immersed in their own professional learning on standards-aligned pedagogy and adult learning theory. By participating as learners first, and then applying their knowledge to plan and facilitate professional learning for other teachers, teacher leaders advance both their own abilities and those of their peers.

Not surprisingly, when surveyed about their leadership experiences, teacher leaders' sense of their own professional growth and their efficacy to support other teachers was overwhelmingly positive.⁵ Specifically, they reported becoming more confident teachers, increasing their capacity to lead fellow teachers, and improving school culture.

Teacher leaders become more confident teachers

Nearly all TPN teacher leaders are more confident practitioners since taking on the leadership role. They have reported improving their craft as they deepened knowledge of both content and pedagogy, while applying it to their practice:

- 91% feel more confident effectively teaching in standards-aligned ways.
- 93% can find and identify high-quality instructional materials to support their practice.

⁵ The survey findings in this section reflect the teacher leaders' responses to a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from *Strongly Agree* to *Neutral* to *Strongly Disagree*. In reporting our percentages, we have combined the two categories *Strongly Agree* and *Agree*. For example, 91 percent of teacher leaders *Strongly Agree* or *Agree* that they feel more confident teaching in standards-aligned ways.

The Who, What, and Why of TPN Teacher Leaders

Who are TPN teacher leaders? TPN teacher leaders are K–12 classroom teachers from across the nation. They are well represented across content areas, years of teaching experience, and urban and rural areas.

What do TPN teacher leaders do? TPN teacher leaders engage a group of teachers for one academic year in ongoing professional learning, such as facilitating face-to-face and virtual learning experiences, coaching peers, modeling instruction, and sharing pedagogical approaches and high-quality materials aligned to state standards.

Why teacher leaders? TPN teacher leaders are developed and supported to build trust and relationships with colleagues, model risk-taking and a growth mindset, lead reflective learning cycles, and observe instruction with non-evaluative feedback. As fellow teachers, they are trusted and respected by their peers.

“Being a teacher leader is as much about improving your own practice through contact with other teachers as it is supporting other teachers.”

– TPN teacher leader

Teacher leaders increase their leadership capacity

After one year of leading their peers, TPN teacher leaders expressed greater confidence in their new leadership role:

- 86% of teacher leaders feel confident in being a teacher leader.
- 89% feel prepared to support or lead professional learning of other teachers.

As part of their preparation to facilitate learning for their peers, teacher leaders gained knowledge in adult learning theory and strategies for supporting their work. In open-ended survey responses, some teacher leaders indicated that they had learned how to have “productive conversations” with their colleagues that they did not feel confident leading before.

“I have had numerous experiences which have stretched me out of my comfort zone and enabled me to grow in my delivery of professional development and in my professional voice.”
– TPN teacher leader

Empowered teacher leaders improve school culture

With many regions experiencing teacher shortages, deliberate efforts like career pathways and teacher-driven professional learning are necessary to improve teacher retention rates. Research indicates that teacher retention and satisfaction is greater in schools where teachers are empowered to be decision-makers, are valued for their expertise, and have opportunities to advance (while remaining in the classroom).⁶ Research also confirms that teacher collaboration is positively associated with greater teacher satisfaction and increased confidence in teaching ability.⁷

Reflecting on the importance of collaboration and the impact of their year as instructional leaders, TPN teacher leaders reported the following:

- 99% value the sharing of teaching ideas and materials as integral to improving practice — their own and that of their peers.
- 86% feel energized about being a teacher from their year as a teacher leader.

This increased teacher satisfaction is particularly important in light of the current widespread teacher-shortage crisis.

Teachers find benefit from teacher-to-teacher professional learning

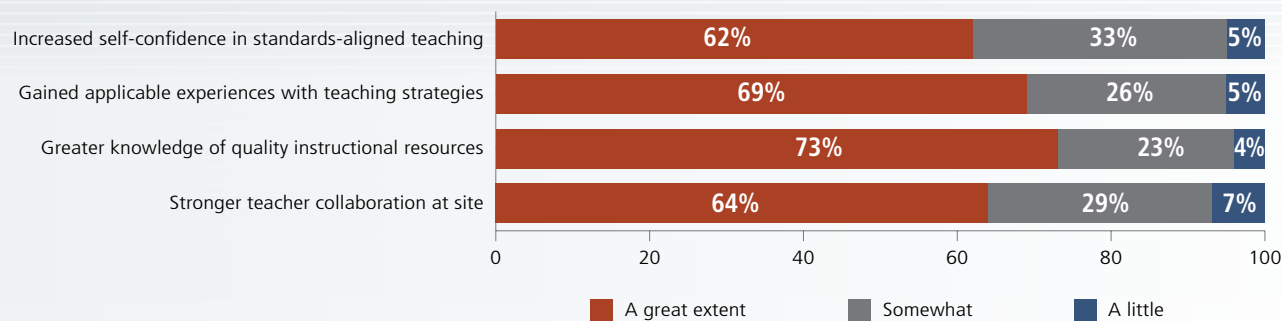
The Center also sought to understand the perceived impact on the teachers who participated as learners in teacher-to-teacher professional learning. More than 2,500 teachers completed the survey, and overwhelmingly, they expressed that the professional learning had a positive impact on helping them feel prepared to teach to the rigors of college- and career-readiness standards.

Reflecting on their year-long, teacher-to-teacher professional learning, 62% of participating teachers reported gaining confidence in their ability to provide standards-aligned instruction in their classrooms, and 69% reported learning relevant teaching strategies. In addition, 64% are enjoying stronger collegial collaboration at their site (see Figure 1 on page 4 for more detail on all of these findings).

6 Natale, C., Gaddis, L., Bassett, K., & McKnight, K. (2016). *Teacher career advancement initiatives: Lessons learned from eight case studies*. Pearson and the National Network of State Teachers of the Year.

7 OECD. (2016). *Supporting teacher professionalism: Insights from TALIS 2013*. Paris, France: OECD Publishing.

Figure 1. Extent to which teachers benefited from one year of teacher-to-teacher professional learning



Source: Teacher Practice Networks Cohort 4 Year 1 Progress Report (2018); Teacher Practice Networks Cohort 3 Year 2 Final Report (2017).

In line with research-based principles of effective professional learning,^{8,9} teachers' learning experiences were content-focused, collaborative, and relevant, as well as sustained over time and oriented toward active learning. These learning experiences, all led by TPN teacher leaders, included modeling, inquiry, coaching, mentoring, peer collaboration, and observation of authentic instruction in teacher leaders' classrooms. Participating teachers reported valuing collaboration focused on instruction and learning from peers.

Administrator Tip 1 – Identifying and recruiting prospective teacher leaders

Strong teacher leadership starts with identifying the right teachers. Too often, prospective teacher leaders are selected because they are master practitioners or seasoned teachers, while key leadership traits — such as social capital, ability to positively influence peers, or experience in adult learning — are overlooked.

We asked the following of our TPN partnering organizations, who develop teacher leaders: "What characteristics do you advise principals to look for in prospective teacher leaders?" Here is what they said:

- Experience working in a collaborative environment with adults (e.g., participating in or leading a professional learning community)
- Emotional intelligence and social capital among peers
- Skilled facilitation
- Strong instructional practices
- Ability to surface teacher needs and adapt professional learning to those needs
- Receptiveness to feedback and willingness to make adjustments
- Desire to be a teacher leader

Teachers may not possess all of these characteristics, but they should be willing to develop skills in areas where they have little or no experience.

8 Desimone, L. (2009). Improving impact studies of teachers' professional development: Toward better conceptualizations and measures. *Educational Researcher* 38(3) 181–199.

9 Darling-Hammond, L., Hyster, M.E., Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective teacher professional development*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

A commitment to time

TPN teacher leaders identified *time* as the most critical support needed to be successful in their work.¹⁰ Without protected time to collaborate with other teacher leaders and without job-embedded time to facilitate professional learning for colleagues, their efforts are severely hampered. Especially when teacher leaders are classroom teachers, as are the TPN teacher leaders, the ability to support their colleagues is simply not possible without time to plan, facilitate, collaborate, and coach.

Ideally, district policy allocates resources to support a professional culture that includes job-embedded time for sustained, teacher-led learning opportunities. Site leaders committed to providing this essential structure have options, such as the strategies suggested in the *Administrator Tip 2* below and the resources identified at the end of this publication.

Administrator Tip 2 – Finding protected time for teacher-to-teacher professional learning

To create time for teacher-led professional learning, re-envision a school schedule that supports this priority

- Design a master schedule with common planning time for teachers of like grade level or subject area
- Provide release time for teacher leaders to conduct non-evaluative observations and to coach peers
- Repurpose existing in-service and faculty meeting time for job-embedded professional learning; use email rather than meeting time for handling administrative issues
- Bank time for professional learning by shortening the school day a few minutes daily or weekly
- Strategically schedule teachers to co-teach or combine classes
- Reassign teacher responsibilities for student enrichment activities to other staff members

The Center view

In this era of advanced technologies and an increasingly complex global society, we expect today's students to master different skills and knowledge than ever before. However, in many cases, we haven't adequately changed school conditions to enable teachers to successfully help their students acquire these new competencies. It's time to see teacher leaders — equipped with their instructional expertise and leadership capabilities — as key levers for increasing teacher capacity, improving school culture, and implementing effective professional learning for teachers.

¹⁰ Teacher leaders identified these other critical supports necessary to their success: training on peer-coaching, knowledge of adult learning theory, coaching on their own facilitation skills, and access to high-quality materials and resources.

This issue is part of a series on the Teacher Practice Networks initiative and its efforts to broadly support teachers for college- and career-readiness instruction.

Resources

Identifying prospective teacher leaders

Teacher leadership skills framework (Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession, 2009). This framework identifies five categories of knowledge, skill sets, and dispositions of effective teacher leaders and illustrates each in a short vignette.
http://cstp-wa.org/cstp2013/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/CSTP_teacher_leadership_skills_framework.pdf

Teacher leader self-assessment (Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession, 2009). A user-friendly self-assessment tool to accompany the *Teacher Leadership Skills Framework* for identifying teacher leadership strengths and areas of need.
http://cstp-wa.org/cstp2013/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/CSTP_self_assessment.pdf

Creating time for professional learning

Time for teachers: Leveraging expanded time to strengthen instruction and empower teachers (Kaplan, Chan, Farbman, & Novoryta, 2015). This study examines how 17 high-poverty schools re-structured their schedules to increase quantity of time for teacher professional learning; the report offers six specific practices.
<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED561995.pdf>

Teacher-led professional learning: To reach every student with excellent teachers—Finding time for professional learning (Public Impact, 2014). In this two-page report, an easy-to-use table shows how 11 different strategies for creating teacher-led professional learning time affect other decisions in operations or finance.
http://opportunityculture.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Finding_Time_for_Professional_Learning-Public_Impact.pdf



The Center for the Future of Teaching & Learning at WestEd is dedicated to strengthening teacher practice. For over two decades, The Center has been steadfast in the pursuit of its mission to ensure that every child learns from a fully prepared and effective teacher.

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Suggested citation: WestEd, Center for the Future of Teaching & Learning. (2018). *Teacher leadership works: It builds, energizes, sustains*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.

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