

TEACHER LEADERS AS THE OPPORTUNITY

by Lowell Milken





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INTRODUCTION

I believe one of the most important things we can do in this life is make the most of the opportunities it affords. Those opportunities are vast and varied. Some are hidden. Others are evident. For highly effective teachers, the opportunities are in plain sight. And none is more important than leading other teachers to maximum effectiveness.

This is the focus of this presentation. Leadership in teachers. How to create and how to expand it.

The effective teacher in the classroom is both the starting point and the engine of excellent and meaningful education. That's because excellent teachers are not only the single most important in-school factor in student learning,¹ the best of them are the key factor in improving the instructional practices and strengthening the skills of their peers.²

It is completely relevant to this topic that 2018 marks the 20th year of the TAP System for Teacher and Student Advancement (TAP), a system I believed was possible and knew was necessary.³ A system I set about creating because the quality of an education system depends—absolutely—upon the quality of its educators.

It is also relevant that the representation among educators and education officials is exceptionally broad at this conference: state policymakers and officials, college leaders, district officials, principals, master, mentor and career teachers, foundation and community leaders, and Milken Educator Award recipients. I mention this breadth because it's going to take this range of professionals and participants to truly fulfill the promise of TAP, of which teacher leadership is an integral part.

The goal of TAP was—and is—to have a highly skilled, strongly motivated, and competitively compensated teacher in every classroom in this country. That goal is bold and each person here knows—perhaps all too well—the distance remaining to reach it. The goal, though, is attainable. And it is my hope that by the time this conference concludes each of you will be better equipped to move toward the priority of having an effective teacher impacting every student.

There is a definitional distinction that is important to make at the outset between a highly effective teacher and a highly effective *teacher leader*. And to make the distinction vividly, I'll give you an example of a teacher I had who was truly great. A titan, really, and a teacher I had the good fortune to have early in life.

Mr. Sutton's genius was to make everything we learned exciting. Elliot Sutton did this by relating it to something that was real in our lives. One of the most important things that was real when I was in sixth grade was the space race with the Soviet Union. So real, in fact, that it caused the Los Angeles Unified School District to swiftly adopt a rigorous math and science curriculum—which Mr. Sutton deployed with equivalent rigor. The results matched his energy and expectation. Why?

Because we wanted to do as right by Mr. Sutton as he was doing by us. Mr. Sutton's rigor also explains the grounding we got in geography, in social studies, in public speaking... in sixth grade! Mr. Sutton allowed us to understand that what we did in his classroom was completely pertinent to our future in middle school, high school and beyond.

Great teachers are about more than what they impart, however. They represent the fact that there can be great teachers. Legions of them. But only if we enlist the teacher leaders we do have to develop the teacher leaders we can have.

Had Mr. Sutton the means to formally lead other teachers and to impart his instructional excellence to his fellow teachers, he could have had a lifetime effect on multiples of the 35 students who passed through his classroom each year.

Elliot Sutton and the aim of dramatically expanding the impact of the excellent teacher were in the front of my mind when I created the Milken Educator Awards (MEA) program more than 30 years ago. The means of expanded impact then was recognition—the elevating and the activating—of outstanding educators.

Recognition is, after all, a powerful motivator for those receiving it and those witnessing it, too. Students of teachers whose talent is seriously recognized follow their lead. We know this.

Since we presented the first 12 MEA awards in 1987, more than 2,700 teachers and principals have been honored in every school setting across the country.⁴ (See Chart 1) It has

CHART 1
Milken Educator Network
2758 Educators from 50 States and D.C.



been a tremendous learning experience to bestow a great many of these awards myself. Being present when an educator is taken completely by surprise in front of the school community and public officials with recognition of his or her contribution is extremely moving and affirming.

The MEA program has had great impact, in particular, derived from the opportunities it's given recipients to extend their reach. However, by its very design the MEA program recognizes excellence among the few whose quality is among the best.

It was not structured to generate excellence and formally expand the instructional opportunities among the many. Clearly, what has been needed is a new—and novel—system. One that makes teacher quality the cornerstone of K-12 reform.

A system that establishes a new structure within schools to attract, develop, retain and motivate highly effective teachers. One that changes the organization of schools specifically to empower talented teachers to take on formal positions and responsibilities to become the teacher leaders driving the instructional program of a school. Yes, a system that addresses teacher recruitment, retention, development and practice.

The elements of the TAP system have been—and are—the answer to this need. And creating teacher leaders was—and is—integral to this pursuit.

So let's talk about teacher leadership—what it is, what it can do, and where it is on the education landscape.

WHY DEVELOPING TEACHER LEADERS IS IMPORTANT AND URGENT

Again, definitions are important. The great and growing interest in teacher leadership is reflected in the wide range of descriptions attached to the idea, from something that is consultative, organic or improvised to programs that include quasi-formal roles, responsibilities and activities.

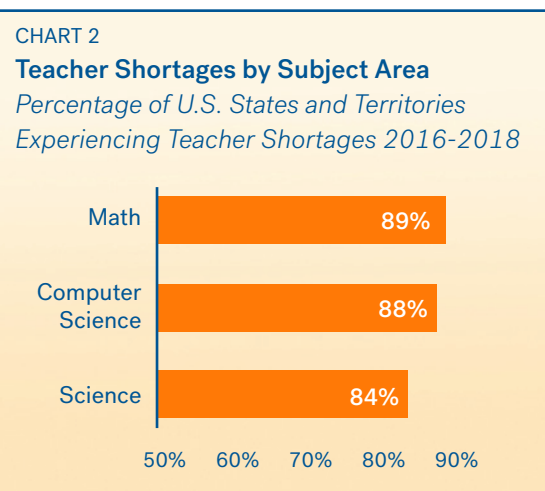
TAP has honed this definition with purpose and specificity. *The teacher leader is the effective teacher who exercises instructional leadership from a designated position within a school, whose structure mandates formal leadership positions that include commensurate compensation, release time, authority and accountability.* Every word of this definition is essential.

Let's start with the core element—the teacher. Effective teachers are the key to good education. But keys work only if you have them and use them. That is, you must have the right information and also act on that information. Education is the one profession that has a chronic shortage of effective practitioners.

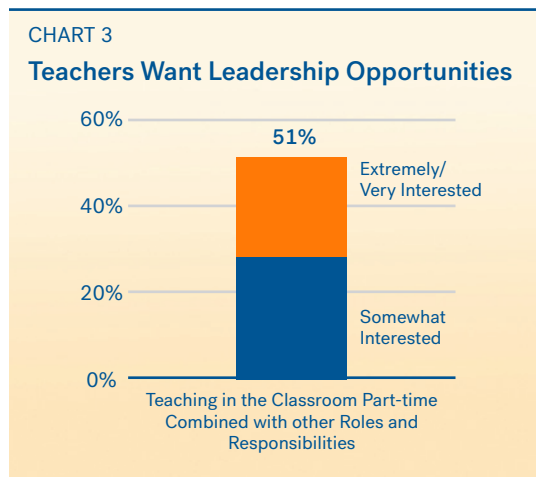
This is about *quality and quantity* for several reasons. Enrollment numbers in schools of education have declined precipitously for one.⁵ Today's strong economy and historically low unemployment incline job seekers toward other sectors. And third, the effect of Baby Boomers' retirement creates a challenging trajectory for education moving forward.

The impact of these factors is felt greatest in certain subject areas such as computer science, math and science (see Chart 2); and this is especially so in many rural and inner-city areas.⁶ This shortage can be turned around if we offer the kind of formal teacher leader opportunities that capable job seekers require.

It is only logical that talented people would look for a career path that enables them to earn more for achieving more. In the case of teachers this means taking on roles and responsibilities that do not remove them from contact with students in classrooms. Working with students is, after all, what attracts most talented people to teaching.



Then there’s the matter of keeping the talent we’ve got. For as we all know teacher turnover remains high.⁷ Current teachers—especially early to mid-career and those with greatest content knowledge and pedagogy skills—are increasingly eager for roles that allow them to affect the instructional program of their schools and afford them an impact in classrooms and beyond.⁸ These very teachers are also the ones who are first to leave teaching for professions that offer the opportunity they need and deserve.



When teachers are asked about leadership opportunities, half of all teachers say they are interested in exploring the possibilities of continuing their work in classrooms combined with new leadership roles and responsibilities in the school or district. And nearly one-quarter of all teachers say, unequivocally, that they have a strong interest in such roles and responsibilities.⁹ (See Chart 3) It only makes sense to give these spirited educators the new roles and responsibilities they want and that will allow them to excel.

It is hardly surprising that teachers who have opportunities to collaborate on instruction, who have significant time and resources for *relevant* professional development, and who are meaningfully evaluated and meaningfully apprised of results, also have students who are learning better and more.¹⁰

There is a growing literature on the correlation between effective teacher leaders and improved instruction and learning.¹¹ We know that the best-performing education systems in the world focus on teacher leaders as the essential driver of student achievement.¹² These findings are exciting and important.

And not surprisingly, this has not gone unnoticed by national organizations and state policymakers with report after report issued on the subject of teacher leadership. And yet, these organizations have not yet acted upon these recommendations by putting in place the required formal structures in schools.

Since teacher leadership is such an obvious—and proven—means to improving teaching and learning and to effecting real reform in education, why don’t we see formal structures on the ground in schools that enable it to take effect? Why aren’t systems in place to develop and support teacher leaders?

The short answer is a lack of capacity.

The fact is that the present American K-12 system is simply not set up to capitalize on the power of talented teachers to generate effective leadership in schools. If it were, the system would not have proven chronically unable to effect significant and sustained change in instruction across classrooms.

CHART 4

Today’s Teachers with Leadership Roles

Do Not Have Sufficient Authority

- ▶ **Only 27%**
Are given responsibility for professional development
- ▶ **Only 10%**
Have input on evaluations
- ▶ **Only 7%**
Evaluate teacher performance

Of course, teacher leadership roles do exist but they are unstructured or limited—incomplete in almost all cases. Teachers are asked to mentor a group of new teachers, for example, or collaborate with colleagues on lesson plans or recruit new teachers to be literacy coaches, but they are not provided the authority and accountability they need.

In the vast majority of schools today, teacher leadership roles do not give teachers responsibility for professional development, nor for input on teacher evaluation and

performance.¹³ (See Chart 4) In fact, only 13% of teachers report that they have a meaningful role in determining the content of professional development.¹⁴

Most teacher leaders also feel they are neither fairly compensated nor given sufficient time to perform their roles.¹⁵ (See Chart 5) Moreover, in schools today teachers with leadership roles do not see themselves as responsible or accountable for student outcomes.¹⁶ (See Chart 6) They see the principal as the instructional leader responsible and accountable. But few principals have sufficient time for this role and many lack the instructional expertise to provide *the support all* teachers need.¹⁷

CHART 5

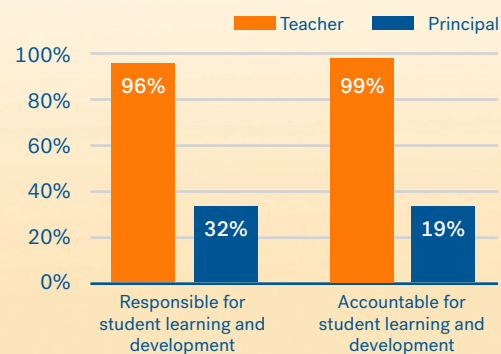
Today’s Teachers with Leadership Roles

Are Not Given Sufficient Support

- ▶ **Only 34%**
Receive a stipend or release time
- ▶ **Only 16%**
Feel fairly compensated for leadership role
- ▶ **Only 18%**
Feel they are given sufficient time to perform their role

CHART 6

Today’s Teachers with Leadership Roles Do Not See Themselves Responsible for Student Outcomes



CONDITIONS REQUIRED TO DEVELOP AND SUSTAIN TEACHER LEADER

The fact is that teacher leadership works only when built into the school structure led by talented teachers who are able to provide intensive daily coaching, who possess command over research-based best practices, *and* who can readily identify and address student learning challenges. To do all this right requires a huge investment of time, know-how, accountability and *authority*. Capital “A.”

Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania who studied a Philadelphia initiative to foster instructional leadership confirmed this—in every detail.¹⁸ “Without the right resources, support, structure, and authority to enact instructional leadership, teacher leaders face[d] strong headwinds to influence the instructional practices of their peers, which is the core challenge of instructional leadership.” The lead researcher of the study, Jonathan Supovitz made it clear that teacher leaders need authority to exert influence over their colleagues, to engage in instructional reform.

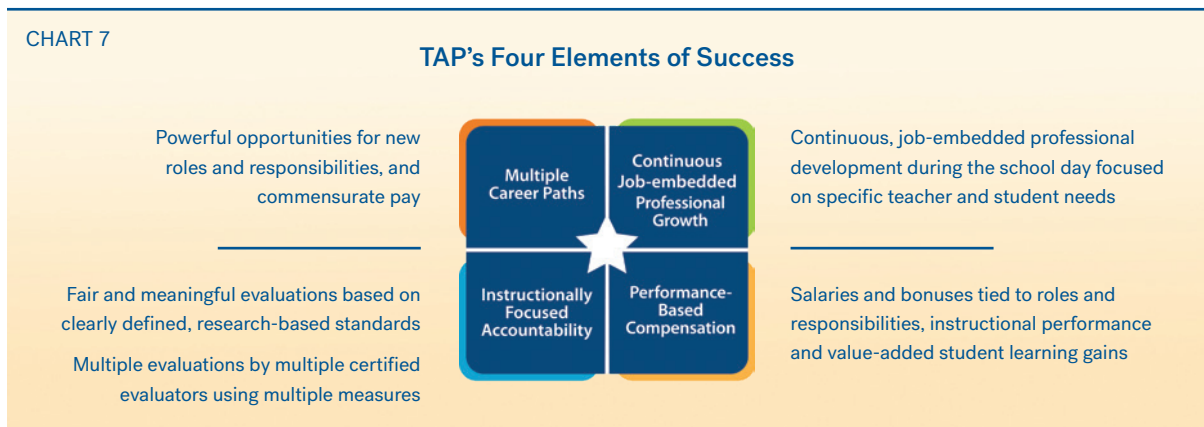
It is self-evident that schools need to do more to improve the instructional skills of teachers. And it should be just as evident—to education leaders and policymakers—that teacher leaders can be the generators of this continuous improvement.

How, though, can we assemble all the necessary parts—teacher’s capacity for leadership, new talent’s demand for reform, solid research and evidence that formal teacher leader positions work?

Education leaders and experts need not look abroad or to national reports to find proven examples of a formal—SYSTEMIC—and demonstrably effective instructional teacher leadership model. TAP exists. And TAP is the answer.

The elements of TAP include:¹⁹

- » Multiple career paths
- » Ongoing daily-applied professional growth
- » Instructionally focused accountability
- » Compensation based on multiple measures of performance



Believing as we do that the quality of an educational system cannot exceed the quality of its educators, the overriding focus of TAP and all of the educator effectiveness initiatives of the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching is precisely on cultivating highly talented teachers and establishing an environment—the system—in which those teachers can work and flourish.

A system that is vibrant, adaptive, relevant, and that affords teacher leaders an impact on instructional practices that result in sustained meaningful student growth. A system that provides the authority, time and resources to empower teacher leaders. This is what allows teachers to lead not against the odds, but with the wind at their back.

And this is what has allowed NIET over the past two decades, to train and develop 30,000 teacher leaders affecting 2.5 million students in 6,000 schools, Pre-K to 12, public, private, charter, urban, rural, tribal, in 250 districts and 20 states.

NIET has created a comprehensive infrastructure to assure teacher effectiveness system-wide. This includes the TAP instructional rubric, the extensive educator training, the connection to more than 50 teacher preparation programs, and the ongoing support—both in person and through our online portal—that includes a learning platform, a database management system and an evaluation certification process.

What are these features and numbers adding up to? A lot. For the simple reason that teachers are delivering more effective instruction. Students in TAP schools are outperforming students in similar schools; TAP's effect on student achievement is large relative to other education reforms; TAP is reducing the black-white and Hispanic-white achievement gap even as these same gaps in matched comparison schools are widening; and TAP is having a significant impact on retaining teachers nationwide.²⁰ And we are seeing these results with more than 95% of TAP schools having *higher* percentages of low-income and minority student populations than statewide averages.

While longitudinal studies, verifiable data and meaningful trends are all crucial to TAP's viability as a system of reform, it is deeply gratifying to hear from so many educators themselves as to the change they are generating for their students. I would like to give you examples of how such a structure is impacting teachers and generating positive changes for students.

At Hmong College Prep Academy, a charter school in a highly challenged St. Paul community, students are largely first generation and thus often speak English as a second language. Before the implementation of TAP a mere *1% of 11th grade students* were proficient in math. After four years of TAP, more than *half* of students reached proficiency. The school has risen from among the lowest-performing 5% of Minnesota schools to the second highest-level ranking in the state.

The positive impact of TAP is also demonstrated at Etowah City School a small *rural* school in the hills of Tennessee serving 400 students, grades Pre-K through 8. For years, the school struggled to increase student growth on Tennessee's one-to-five scale yet earned straight ones in every grade level and subject area. Four years after implementing the TAP system with fidelity, Etowah earned the highest marks possible with fives in all grades and subject areas for the 2016-17 school year.

And consider what's happened at G. W. Carver Primary School outside Baton Rouge, a school where over 90% of students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. Where not one student in grades 3, 4 or 5 was reading at grade level before TAP. In just two years of TAP, three-quarters of Carver's third- through fifth-grade students are reading at grade level. And the teacher retention rate, once abysmal, is, today an extraordinary 95%.

Results of this sort and scale are not about alchemy. They are about cause and effect. When you put in place a structure that offers powerful opportunities for career advancement, professional growth and competitive compensation; that provides flexibility for curriculum; that creates a collegial environment; that focuses on high-quality instruction in classroom practice and engaged learning among students; and that uses multiple measures for evaluation capable of differentiating teacher performance and providing detailed feedback for improvement; that is when you can recruit, develop and keep highly effective educators. That is when you effect *continuous* improvement by lifting the instructional capacity of *every* educator, and when you develop a teacher pipeline that's full of talent and promise.

Many educators, administrators and policy leaders have contributed to the implementation and growth of TAP and NIET. Others have reviewed the evidence and are embarking upon the opportunities for growth inherent within the elements of this powerful system. Two decades of results, two decades of lives positively changed reaffirm that it is—absolutely—possible to achieve the aim of having a Mr. Sutton in every classroom in this country.

WHAT WE NEED TO DO

Much does remain to be done to extend the reach of systemic reform to more and more districts and schools. So to those already engaged with TAP and NIET, let me highlight exactly what you can do to advance our shared aim. And to those of you considering these initiatives, I hope you'll take note of how you can jump right in and make a difference. NIET is ready to work with you.

State Education Leaders: You can champion and provide funding for formal, instructional teacher leadership positions and define standards to measure the effectiveness and impact.

College of Education Leaders: You can prepare teachers for leadership roles focused on instruction; prepare principals to effectively manage teacher leaders; and establish specialized and advanced credentials for teacher leaders.

District Officials: You can use existing resources to create and fund formal teacher leadership positions; adopt a common language for instructional excellence; and integrate school teacher leaders into all district-level instructional improvement initiatives.

Principals: You can ensure that the selection of teacher leaders is based on a defined set of standards, accomplishments, and skills; provide teacher leaders with ongoing training and support; and provide release time and shared instructional responsibility.

And finally, to the **Teacher Leaders:** By virtue of your unique experience, it is essential that you advocate for formal instructional teacher leadership roles and continue to exemplify how teacher leaders with the right structure, authority, time and resources, build the capacity of all teachers and enable students to excel.

CONCLUSION

Just as any successful team needs outstanding players in all positions, so does the education team within the school. It needs the highly effective principal out front, the highly effective teacher in the classroom, and the highly effective teacher leader joining the work of both to do something quite extraordinary—to impart excellent ways of learning to students and excellent ways of teaching to teachers.

Lest anyone think doing this is for the faint of heart, think again. To completely re-form a system, while working within in it, is hard.

Teacher leadership takes particular energy, talent and nerve. It takes the willingness—and the courage—to do more, risk more, share more and be held to account more.

To take all this on in my view is plain heroic. But it is eminently doable and need not—must not—be rare. It must be usual and prevalent. For when the day comes that teacher leaders abound, then we will have a system of education in which every school is guided and taught by a person worthy of the title and claim to be a teacher.

Portions of this presentation were given at the 18th Annual National TAP Conference in Washington, D.C., on March 23, 2018.

For information and resources, please refer to “Unleashing Teacher Leadership” at teachfactor.niet.org or call (310) 570-4860.



Lowell Milken
*Founder and Chairman
National Institute for
Excellence in Teaching*

ABOUT LOWELL MILKEN

For nearly four decades, Lowell Milken has dedicated his time, ideas and resources to creating a K-12 education system that serves both the young people who depend on it and the professionals who deliver it. Since formalizing his commitment to education in 1982 by co-founding and chairing the Milken Family Foundation, Lowell has not wavered in his belief that teaching is the most essential of all professions. An international businessman as well as a philanthropist, he understands that America's future strength lies in direct correlation to the excellence of its educators. For Lowell, education is not only the most fundamental of life's opportunities; it is fundamental to our security as a democracy.

Following are three hallmark initiatives created by Lowell to recognize, develop and multiply educator effectiveness in every corner of our nation.

- » **The Milken Educator Awards** were first presented in 1987 to spotlight the importance of outstanding educators and to encourage talented young people to choose teaching as a profession. Coined "the Oscars of teaching" by *Teacher* magazine, these Awards recognize exceptional early- to mid-career teachers and principals with unrestricted \$25,000 financial prizes during surprise ceremonies surrounded by students, faculty, dignitaries and media. The Milken Educator Awards' coast-to-coast network of 2,758 recipients serves as a valued resource to policy makers, and is dedicated to strengthening education at local, state, national and international levels.
- » With a goal to significantly and systematically increase the supply of effective educators, Lowell introduced the **TAP System for Teacher and Student Advancement** in 1999. The TAP model of whole school reform incorporates multiple career paths; continuous job-embedded professional growth; performance-based compensation; and accountability with trained evaluators and detailed feedback for improvement. TAP's positive impact on teacher excellence and student achievement has been validated by more than 100 research studies.
- » Demand for TAP's proven reforms compelled Lowell to establish the **National Institute for Excellence in Teaching** (NIET) in 2005. The goal is nothing less than ensuring a highly skilled, strongly motivated and competitively compensated teacher for every classroom in America. NIET's team of educators, research and policy experts forge partnerships that create leadership and

professional development opportunities for educators to thrive. Partners range from schools, districts and states to universities and other nonprofit organizations. NIET, including the TAP System, impacts more than 250,000 educators and 2.5 million students daily.

Looking to the future, NIET is partnering with universities in multiple states to reimagine teacher preparation. These programs are graduating educators well-prepared to make a positive impact on students and promise a significant and lasting impact on the teaching profession.

Lowell's groundbreaking achievements in education reform were most recently recognized by the Education Commission of the States with the 2017 James Bryant Conant Award for significant individual contributions to American education. He has also been honored by the National Association of State Boards of Education, Horace Mann League, National Association of Secondary School Principals, Jewish Theological Seminary, Kappa Delta Pi international honor society in the field of education, and UCLA School of Law. Chapman University and Hebrew Union College have each presented him with an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters.

Lowell Milken is a product of California's public school system, graduating Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude from the University of California, Berkeley, where he received the School of Business Administration's Most Outstanding Student Award. He went on to earn a law degree from the University of California, Los Angeles, with academic honors of Order of the Coif and the distinction of UCLA Law Review.

“Human capital is the beating heart of education. And developing strong human capital is not only the goal of education, it is the means to achieving that goal. For without vibrant, engaged, excellent educators, there is little chance of producing students with those qualities.”

— Lowell Milken

NOTES

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— Lowell Milken,
NIET Chairman and TAP Founder

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