

**Indicators and Perceptions of Teacher Leadership in Illinois:  
Five Teacher Characteristics and Three School Demographics**

Jana Lynn Hunzicker

Department of Education, Counseling, and Leadership

Bradley University

May 17, 2023

**Author Note**

Jana Lynn Hunzicker  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9925-6388>

This manuscript reports one empirical study that was originally published as two separate articles in two different state-level journals. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Jana Hunzicker, Bradley University, 1501 W. Bradley Avenue, Westlake Hall 208, Peoria, IL 61625. Email: [jhunzicker@bradley.edu](mailto:jhunzicker@bradley.edu)

### **Abstract**

An indicator is a gauge or sense that allows a person to draw a conclusion. Because teacher leadership is so vaguely defined in both research and practice, indicators can assist teachers in using their perceptual knowledge to recognize and define teacher leadership. This article reports the findings of a statewide study conducted to better understand which indicators of teacher leadership Illinois teachers consider strong and which indicators they consider weak. The study, which compared teachers' perceptions across five teacher characteristics and three school demographics, was originally published as two separate articles in two different state-level journals. Across all comparisons, the study's findings revealed *expertise* and *credibility* as the two strongest indicators of teacher leadership, with *frequency* running a close third. *Variety* and *connections* fell somewhere in the middle, and *credentials* and *scale* emerged as the two weakest indicators.

*Key words:* teacher leadership, teacher leader self-perceptions, indicators of teacher leadership

**Indicators and Perceptions of Teacher Leadership in Illinois:  
Five Teacher Characteristics and Three School Demographics**

Teacher leadership has been described in terms of influence (York-Barr & Duke, 2004), roles and responsibilities (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Moller & Pankake, 2006), functions (TLEC, 2012), competencies (NEA et al. 2018), skill sets (Danielson, 2006), worldviews (Smulyan, 2016), and social networks (Shea et al., 2020). Different perspectives offer valuable contributions, yet varying notions of teacher leadership create ambiguity. According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2023), an indicator is a gauge or sense that allows a person to draw a conclusion. Because teacher leadership is so vaguely defined in both research and practice, indicators can assist teachers in using their perceptual knowledge to recognize and define teacher leadership. In other words, even if teachers cannot articulate what teacher leadership is and what it is not, they “know it when they see it.”

This article reports findings of a statewide study conducted to better understand which indicators of teacher leadership Illinois teachers consider strong and which indicators they consider weak. In November 2022, the first report of the study, which compared Illinois teachers’ perceptions of teacher leadership across three school demographics (region of the state; rural, suburban, or urban community; and school socioeconomic status), was published in the *Illinois School Board Journal* (Hunzicker, 2022). The second and final report, which compared Illinois teachers’ perceptions of teacher leadership across five teacher characteristics (grade range taught, years of teaching experience, highest academic achievement, leadership credentials, and teacher leader self-perception), was published in the *Illinois ASCD Quarterly Journal* (Hunzicker, 2023). In this combined version of the two manuscripts, teachers’ perceptions of leadership in comparison to the five teacher characteristics will be reported and discussed first, followed by the three school demographics.

### The Study

Using an online survey, data were collected between October 2019 and February 2020. An invitation to participate that included the study's survey link was sent via email to each Regional Office of Education (ROE) in Illinois, requesting that the invitation be forwarded to all district superintendents within their region. Chicago Public Schools was excluded due to extensive requirements for getting permission to conduct research. Superintendents were asked to forward the email to all teachers in their district. In this way, all teachers employed in an Illinois public school outside of Chicago at the time of the study were potentially invited to participate.

The survey, which was administered using Qualtrics Survey Software, included a rating exercise, a ranking exercise, and 12 demographic survey questions. This article reports quantitative findings for the ranking exercise, which was designed to address the study's second research question: Which indicators of teacher leadership do Illinois teachers consider strong and which do they consider weak? A total of 177 teachers completed the survey, but only 107 provided the demographic information required for the study's second phase of analysis (reported here). The majority of respondents were women, a full range of public school settings were represented, and teachers from all regions of the state participated, except for the City of Chicago.

### Seven Indicators of Teacher Leadership

Seven indicators of teacher leadership can be used to distinguish teacher leadership from simply teacher professionalism: connections, credentials, credibility, expertise, frequency, scale, and variety (Hunzicker, 2019). A definition for each indicator is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Mean Rankings of Strongest to Weakest Indicators of Teacher Leadership Overall*

Rank	Indicator	Definition	Mean
1	Expertise	A teacher leader is an expert or "go to" person.	2.63
2	Credibility	A teacher leader is an exemplary teacher.	2.74

3	Frequency	A teacher leader engages in acts of leadership often.	3.69
4	Connections	A teacher leader is well-networked with others.	3.96
5	Variety	A teacher leader engages in many different types of leadership.	4.25
6	Credentials	A teacher leader is trained or certified as a teacher leader.	4.86
7	Scale	A teacher leader coordinates large-scale projects/initiatives.	5.83

To determine which indicators Illinois teachers considered strong and which indicators they considered weak, survey respondents were asked to rank the seven indicators from strongest, or most likely to identify a teacher leader (1), to weakest, or least likely to identify a teacher leader (7). Overall, respondents ranked *expertise* (2.63) and *credibility* (2.74) as the two strongest indicators of teacher leadership and *scale* (5.83) as the weakest indicator of teacher leadership. *Frequency* (3.69), *connections* (3.96), *variety* (4.25), and *credentials* (4.86) fell somewhere in between (see Table 1). The means reported here represent the ranking averages for the 107 responses eligible for the study's second analysis. It should be noted that, although the means differed slightly for the 177 responses utilized in the study's first analysis (Hunzicker, 2022), the ranked order of the seven indicators of teacher leadership was the same in both analyses.

### Five Teacher Characteristics

First, teachers' overall perceptions of the seven indicators of teacher leadership were analyzed by subgroup across five teacher characteristics: grade range taught, years of teaching experience, highest academic achievement, leadership credentials, and teacher leader self-perception.

#### Grade Range Taught

Of the study's 107 respondents, 18 (17%) taught grades PK-2, 14 (13%) taught grades 3-5, 18 (17%) taught grades 6-8, 30 (28%) taught grades 9-12, and 27 (25%) taught a combination of grades within PK-12. When the overall rankings of the seven indicators were compared to subgroups by grade range taught, teachers across all grade ranges ranked *expertise* and *credibility* as the strongest two indicators of teacher leadership, with only teachers teaching a

combination of grade ranges ranking *credibility* higher than *expertise* (see Table 2). Teachers across all grade ranges ranked *frequency* as the third or fourth strongest indicator, with PK-5 teachers ranking *frequency* slightly lower than teachers at other grade levels. Instead, PK-5 teachers ranked *connections* higher (3) and *variety* and *credentials* lower (6 and 5), whereas high school teachers (grades 9-12) and teachers teaching a combination of grade ranges rated *connections* and *credentials* lower (5 and 6) than the other groups. Across all grade ranges, teachers consistently ranked *scale* as the weakest indicator of teacher leadership (7). In the grade range taught comparison, only the rankings of teachers in grades 6-8 mirrored the study's overall rankings for all seven indicators.

**Table 2**

*Mean Rankings of Strongest to Weakest Indicators of Teacher Leadership by Grade Range Taught*

	Overall Rank	Grades PK-2	Grades 3-5	Grades 6-8	Grades 9-12	Combination of grade levels
<b>Expertise</b>	1	1	1	1	1	2
<b>Credibility</b>	2	2	2	2	2	1
<b>Frequency</b>	3	4	4	3	3	3
<b>Connections</b>	4	3	3	4	5	5
<b>Variety</b>	5	6	6	5	4	4
<b>Credentials</b>	6	5	5	6	6	6
<b>Scale</b>	7	7	7	7	7	7

Note: Shaded areas indicate variations from the overall and subgroup rankings.

### **Years of Teaching Experience**

Of the study's 107 respondents, 17 (16%) had 1-5 years of teaching experience, 21 (20%) had 6-10 years of teaching experience, 23 (21%) had 11-15 years of teaching experience, 16 (15%) had 16-20 years of teaching experience, and 30 (28%) had more than 20 years of teaching experience. When the overall rankings of the seven indicators of teacher leadership were compared to subgroups by years of teaching experience, teachers at all experience levels again ranked *expertise* and *credibility* as the strongest two indicators of teacher leadership, with one

exception (see Table 3). Teachers with 1-5 years of experience ranked *frequency* higher (2) than *credibility* (3). While teachers with 6-20 years of experience ranked *frequency* either third or fourth, teachers with more than 20 years of experience ranked *frequency* even lower (5), flagging *frequency* as an undecided indicator of teacher leadership in this comparison. Rankings by years of teaching experience also varied for *connections*, where teachers with 11-15 and more than 20 years of experience ranked *connections* third, or more important; and teachers with 1-5 and 16-20 years of experience ranked *connections* fifth, or less important. Teachers across all years of teaching experience ranked *variety* fourth or fifth, and all groups consistently rated *credentials* (6) and *scale* (7). In the years of teaching experience comparison, the rankings of teachers with 6-10 years of teaching experience were closest to the study's overall rankings.

**Table 3**

*Mean Rankings of Strongest to Weakest Indicators of Teacher Leadership by Years of Teaching Experience*

	Overall Rank	1-5 Years	6-10 Years	11-15 Years	16-20 Years	More than 20 Years
<b>Expertise</b>	1	1	2	2	1	1
<b>Credibility</b>	2	3	1	1	2	2
<b>Frequency</b>	3	2	3	4	3	5
<b>Connections</b>	4	5	4	3	5	3
<b>Variety</b>	5	4	5	5	4	4
<b>Credentials</b>	6	6	6	6	6	6
<b>Scale</b>	7	7	7	7	7	7

Note: Shaded areas indicate variations from the overall and subgroup rankings.

### Highest Academic Achievement

Of the study's 107 respondents, 35 (33%) held a bachelor's degree, 64 (60%) held a master's degree, 5 (4%) held a doctoral degree, and 3 (3%) held a graduate-level certificate, license, or endorsement. When the overall rankings of the seven indicators of teacher leadership were compared to subgroups by highest academic achievement, the rankings of teachers holding a graduate-level certificate, license, or endorsement varied significantly from the norm (see

Table 4). For example, teachers who held a bachelor's, master's, or a doctoral degree ranked *expertise* and *credibility* as the two strongest indicators of teacher leadership, while teachers whose highest academic achievement was a graduate-level credential ranked *expertise* fourth. The rankings of the graduate-level credential group also resulted in a tied mean for *credibility* and *credentials*, revealing that this group considered *expertise* and *credibility* weaker indicators and *credentials* a stronger indicator than teachers in the other groups. Teachers across all academic achievement categories ranked *variety* fifth and *scale* sixth or seventh. While teachers holding a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree ranked *connections* third or fourth, the graduate-level credentials group ranked *connections* seventh. In the highest academic achievement comparison, the bachelor's and doctoral degree groups ranked the seven indicators very closely to the study's overall rankings, but the master's degree group's rankings were identical to the study's overall rankings.

**Table 4**

*Mean Rankings of Strongest to Weakest Indicators of Teacher Leadership by Highest Academic Achievement*

	Overall Rank	Bachelor's Degree	Master's Degree	Doctoral Degree	Graduate-level Certificate, License, or Endorsement
<b>Expertise</b>	1	1	1	2	4
<b>Credibility</b>	2	2	2	1	2*
<b>Frequency</b>	3	4	3	4	1
<b>Connections</b>	4	3	4	3	7
<b>Variety</b>	5	5	5	5	5
<b>Credentials</b>	6	6	6	7	3*
<b>Scale</b>	7	7	7	6	6

Note: Asterisks identify rankings with a tied mean, indicating that the rankings could be reversed (e.g., 3, 2 instead of 2, 3). Shaded areas indicate variations from the overall and subgroup rankings.

### Leadership Credentials

Of the study's 107 respondents, 41 (38%) held a school- or district-level teacher leadership role or title, 6 (6%) held a district- or regional-level teacher leadership credential, 10

(9%) held National Board Certification and/or a state teacher leadership endorsement, 6 (6%) held a state-level administrative license, and 44 (41%) held no leadership credentials. When the overall rankings of the seven indicators of teacher leadership were compared to subgroups by leadership credentials, all groups ranked *expertise* and *credibility* as the strongest indicators of teacher leadership (1 or 2), except for teachers with a district or regional teacher leadership credential (see Table 5). The rankings of the district or regional teacher leadership credential group resulted in a tied mean for *credibility* and *connections*, revealing that this group considered *credibility* less important and *connections* more important than teachers in the other groups. Teachers holding a district or regional teacher leadership credential also ranked *frequency* lower (5) than teachers in all other groups (3 or 4). Similarly, while most groups also ranked *connections* third or fourth, teachers holding a state administrative license ranked *connections* sixth. On the other hand, while most groups ranked *variety* fourth or fifth, teachers holding a state administrative license ranked *variety* third. As in other comparisons, most groups ranked *credentials* and *scale* as the two weakest indicators of teacher leadership (6 and 7). However, the state administrative license group ranked *credentials* fifth, more important than *connections* (6), revealing a different perspective than the other groups. In the leadership credentials comparison, the rankings of teachers holding National Board Certification and/or a state teacher leadership endorsement were close to the study's overall rankings. The rankings of teachers holding a school or district teacher leadership role or title and teachers with no leadership credentials at all were identical to the study's overall rankings.

**Table 5**

*Mean Rankings of Strongest to Weakest Indicators of Teacher Leadership by Leadership Credentials*

Overall Rank	School or District TL Role/Title	District or Regional TL Credential	National Board Certification and/or State TL Endorsement	State Administrative License	None
--------------	----------------------------------	------------------------------------	----------------------------------------------------------	------------------------------	------

<b>Expertise</b>	1	1	1	2	2	1
<b>Credibility</b>	2	2	3*	1	1	2
<b>Frequency</b>	3	3	5	4	4	3
<b>Connections</b>	4	4	2*	3	6	4
<b>Variety</b>	5	5	4	5*	3	5
<b>Credentials</b>	6	6	6*	6*	5	6
<b>Scale</b>	7	7	7*	7	7	7

Note: Asterisks identify rankings with a tied mean, indicating that the rankings could be reversed (e.g., 3, 2 instead of 2, 3). Shaded areas indicate variations from the overall and subgroup rankings.

### Teacher Leader Self-Perception

In this study, participants were asked to identify with one of four teacher leader self-perceptions. The identity of *professional teacher* was described in the survey as, “I do not consider myself a teacher leader. I prefer to focus on my own students, teaching practices, and classroom.” The identity of *aspiring teacher leader* was described as, “I would like to serve as a teacher leader but have not had the time, do not feel ready, or have not had very many opportunities to do so. I am currently building my teaching knowledge and skills but hope to serve as a teacher leader sometime in the future.” The identity of *developing teacher leader* was described as, “I have served in a few teacher leadership roles and assumed a few leadership responsibilities for the benefit of students in and beyond my own classroom. I am currently building my teaching and leadership knowledge and skills so that I can lead even more.” The identity of *teacher leader* was described as, “I have served in a variety of teacher leadership roles and assumed many different leadership responsibilities for the benefit of students in and beyond my own classroom. I believe my colleagues view me as a teacher leader.”

Of the study’s 107 respondents, 15 (14%) described themselves as professional teachers, 18 (17%) described themselves as aspiring teacher leaders, 36 (34%) described themselves as developing teacher leaders, and 38 (35%) described themselves as teacher leaders. When the overall rankings of the seven indicators of teacher leadership were compared to subgroups by teacher leader self-perception, once again all groups except one ranked *expertise* and *credibility*

as the two strongest indicators of teacher leadership (see Table 6). Only the rankings of aspiring teacher leaders resulted in a tied mean for *credibility* and *frequency*, revealing that this group considered *credibility* less important and *frequency* more important than teachers in the other groups, who ranked *frequency* third or fourth. The rankings for *connections* varied widely, with professional teachers and developing teacher leaders ranking *connections* stronger (3) and aspiring teacher leaders and teacher leaders ranking *connections* weaker (5) compared to the study's overall ranking of 4. While aspiring, developing, and teacher leaders ranked *variety* fourth or fifth and *credentials* a consistent 6, the professional teacher group ranked *variety* sixth and *credentials* fifth, indicating that *credentials* were more important than *variety*. As in the previous comparisons, teachers across all self-perception groups ranked *scale* seventh, or the weakest indicator of teacher leadership. The teacher leader self-perception comparison is the only comparison in the study where none of the subgroups ranked closely or consistently with the study's overall rankings.

**Table 6**

*Mean Rankings of Strongest to Weakest Indicators of Teacher Leadership by Teacher Leader Self-Perception*

	Overall Rank	Professional Teacher	Aspiring Teacher Leader	Developing Teacher Leader	Teacher Leader
<b>Expertise</b>	1	1	1	2	1
<b>Credibility</b>	2	2	3*	1	2
<b>Frequency</b>	3	4	2*	4	3
<b>Connections</b>	4	3	5	3	5
<b>Variety</b>	5	6	4	5	4
<b>Credentials</b>	6	5	6	6	6
<b>Scale</b>	7	7	7	7	7

Note: Asterisks identify rankings with a tied mean, indicating that the rankings could be reversed (e.g., 3, 2 instead of 2, 3). Shaded areas indicate variations from the overall and subgroup rankings.

**Key Take Aways: Five Teacher Characteristics**

Comparing Illinois teachers' perceptions of teacher leadership by grade range taught, years of teaching experience, highest academic achievement, leadership credentials, and teacher leader self-perception offers great insight regarding which indicators of teacher leadership Illinois teachers consider strong and which they consider weak.

***Expertise and Credibility***

In this study, *expertise* was defined as being an expert or “go to” person. With only one exception, *expertise* was considered either the first or the second indicator of teacher leadership across all comparisons. Only teachers holding a graduate-level credential ranked *expertise* lower (4) in favor of *frequency*, *credibility*, and *credentials*. Because teachers in the study whose highest academic achievement was a graduate-level credential comprised only 3% of the study's respondents, this finding appears to be an anomaly. Because this subgroup did not hold graduate degrees, they may have prioritized credentials and frequent acts of teacher leadership over being a known expert due to their higher visibility.

*Credibility* was defined in this study as being an exemplary teacher. Although most respondents ranked *credibility* as the first or second strongest indicator of teacher leadership, teachers with 1-5 years of experience, teachers holding a graduate-level credential, aspiring teacher leaders, and – to a lesser extent – teachers holding a district or regional teacher leadership credential ranked *credibility* as the third strongest indicator, in favor of *frequency*, *credentials*, and *connections*. One common theme among these four subgroups is teachers' novice or developing status as teacher leaders. Again, it is possible that these teachers recognized visible and immediate indicators of teacher leadership, like *connections*, more so than abstract indicators, like *credibility*. One respondent reasoned, “Being an exemplary teacher creates the respect needed from peers to be seen as a leader.” Taking into consideration the overall and subgroup rankings for *expertise* and *credibility* across all five comparisons in this

analysis, the 107 teachers in this study largely viewed *expertise* and *credibility* as the two indicators most likely to identify a teacher leader.

### ***Frequency***

In this study, *frequency* was defined as engaging in acts of leadership often. While most respondents ranked *frequency* as either the third or fourth strongest indicator of teacher leadership, four subgroups varied from the norm. While teachers with 20 or more years of teaching experience and teachers holding a district or regional teacher leadership credential ranked frequency fifth, or weaker, than other groups, teachers holding a graduate-level credential and aspiring teacher leaders ranked *frequency* as first or second most important, with rankings of 1 and 2 respectively. One respondent explained, “A teacher leader must successfully perform acts of leadership often.” Again, it is possible that because the graduate-level credentialed teachers and the aspiring teacher leaders were still developing as teacher leaders, they may have been more likely to prioritize *frequency* as a visible and immediate indicator of teacher leadership. Because teachers with 20 or more years of experience and those holding district or regional teacher leadership credentials generally have more leadership experience, they may have been more likely to prioritize quality over quantity. These findings indicate that *frequency* is a stronger indicator of teacher leadership, but rarely the strongest indicator.

### ***Connections and Variety***

Teachers in most subgroups ranked *connections* and *variety* as the third, fourth, or fifth indicator of teacher leadership, suggesting that these indicators are neither strong nor weak in terms of identifying teacher leadership. However, four subgroups ranked *connections* and *variety* lower than the others. PK-5 teachers and teachers identifying as professional teachers (as opposed to aspiring, developing, or teacher leaders) ranked *variety* sixth. Teachers holding a state administrative license ranked *connections* sixth, and teachers holding a graduate-level credential ranked *connections* seventh. In this study, *connections* was defined as a teacher leader who is well-networked with others. Perhaps teachers holding graduate-level and/or

administrative credentials viewed teacher leadership as an individual endeavor more so than a team effort. *Variety* was defined as engaging in many different types of leadership. It is possible that teachers in the primary and elementary grades and those with no desire to engage in leadership activities are more focused on classroom routines and/or one or two types of teacher leadership instead of many different types. This possibility is supported by the fact that 44% of the teacher respondents in this study held no teacher leadership credentials. Based on these findings, both *connections* and *variety* appear to be less important indicators of teacher leadership.

### ***Credentials and Scale***

Across the board, *credentials* and *scale* were considered the two weakest indicators of teacher leadership by most teacher subgroups, with *credentials* generally rated slightly higher (6) than *scale* (7). One respondent commented, "Leadership is seen more than it is certified," and another respondent wrote, "Leadership is demonstrated, not designated by credentials." Even so, four teacher subgroups ranked *credentials* higher. PK-5 teachers and professional teachers ranked *credentials* fifth, more important than *variety*. Teachers holding a state administrative license ranked *credentials* fifth, more important than *connections*; and teachers holding a graduate-level credential ranked *credentials* third, more important than both *expertise* and *variety*. In this study, *credentials* was defined as being trained or certified as a teacher leader. It seems that teachers who were highly focused on their classroom teaching and those who held a leadership or graduate-level credential were most likely to recognize *credentials* as a strong indicator of teacher leadership. One respondent reasoned, "Once trained, a teacher should have the credentials to lead. Expertise, credibility, and credentials should go hand in hand." *Scale*, which was defined as coordinating large-scale projects or initiatives, was consistently ranked lowest (7) across all subgroups, with only teachers holding a doctorate or a graduate-level credential rating *scale* sixth. One respondent explained, "Scale is not always relevant. I have worked in small districts and large districts. Not all leaders have a large scale to

work in.” Taking into consideration the overall and subgroup rankings for *credentials* and *scale* across all five comparisons, the teachers in this study generally viewed *credentials* and *scale* as the two indicators least likely to identify teacher leadership.

### **Summary: Five Teacher Characteristics**

Based on the rankings of 107 teachers, *expertise* and *credibility* were the two strongest indicators of teacher leadership, with *frequency* running a close third. *Variety* and *connections* fell somewhere in the middle, and *credentials* and *scale* emerged as the two weakest indicators.

### **Three School Demographics**

Next, teachers’ overall perceptions of the seven indicators of teacher leadership were analyzed across three school demographics: region of the state, school setting, and percentage of low-income students.

#### **Region of the State**

Of the study’s 177 respondents, 19 (11%) taught in Southern Illinois, 56 (32%) taught in Central Illinois, 14 (8%) taught in Eastern Illinois, 11 (6%) taught in Western Illinois, 18 (10%) taught in Northern Illinois, and 59 (33%) taught in the Chicago suburbs, but not Chicago. When the overall rankings of the seven indicators were compared by region of the state, teachers in all six regions ranked *expertise* and *credibility* as the strongest two indicators of teacher leadership (see Table 7). Teachers in five of the six regions ranked *scale* as the weakest indicator of teacher leadership, with teachers in Northern Illinois ranking *scale* fifth out of seven. Similarly, teachers in five of the six regions ranked *frequency* and *connections* as either third or fourth of seven, and the same five regions ranked *credentials* and *variety* as either 5 or 6 out of 7. Again, the exception was teachers in Northern Illinois, who agreed with the majority on *frequency* but ranked *variety* 4, *connections* 6, and *credentials* 7. Even with the slight difference of opinion among Northern Illinois teachers, participating teachers from all six regions of the state agreed that *expertise* and *credibility* were strong indicators of teacher leadership while *scale* was a weak (or at least weaker) indicator of teacher leadership.

**Table 7**

*Mean Rankings of Strongest to Weakest Indicators of Teacher Leadership by Region of the State*

	Overall Rank	Central Illinois	Chicago Suburbs	Eastern Illinois	Northern Illinois	Southern Illinois	Western Illinois
<b>Expertise</b>	1	1	1	2	1	2	2
<b>Credibility</b>	2	2	2	1	2	1	1
<b>Frequency</b>	3	4	3	4*	3	3	4
<b>Connections</b>	4	3	4	3	6	4	3
<b>Variety</b>	5	5	6	5*	4	6	6
<b>Credentials</b>	6	6	5	6	7	5	5
<b>Scale</b>	7	7	7	7	5	7	7

Note: Asterisks identify rankings with a tied mean, indicating that the rankings could be reversed (e.g., 5, 4 instead of 4, 5). Shaded areas indicate variations from the overall and subgroup rankings.

### **School Setting**

Of the study's 177 respondents, 112 (62%) taught in rural or small town school settings, 59 (34%) taught in suburbs or cities, and 6 (4%) taught in urban school settings, but not Chicago. When the overall rankings of the seven indicators of teacher leadership were compared by school setting, teachers from rural and small town schools and teachers from suburban and city schools ranked the seven indicators identically to the study's overall rankings (see Table 8). Teachers from urban school settings other than Chicago agreed that *expertise* and *credibility* were the top two indicators of teacher leadership, and that *scale* was the weakest indicator of teacher leadership, but this group ranked *connection* (3) and *credentials* (4) higher than the other groups, and *frequency* (5) and *variety* (6) lower than the other groups. So, compared to teachers in small towns, suburbs, and cities, teachers in urban school settings ranked *connection* and *credentials* as stronger indicators of teacher leadership and *frequency* and *variety* as weaker indicators of teacher leadership. This finding suggests that teachers in urban school settings gauge or sense teacher leadership differently than teachers in small towns, suburbs, and cities, perhaps due to differences in teaching responsibilities.

**Table 8***Mean Rankings of Strongest to Weakest Indicators of Teacher Leadership by School Setting*

	Overall Rank	Rural/ Small Town	Suburban/ City	Urban/ Not Chicago
<b>Expertise</b>	1	1	1	2
<b>Credibility</b>	2	2	2	1
<b>Frequency</b>	3	3	3	5
<b>Connections</b>	4	4	4	3
<b>Variety</b>	5	5	5	6
<b>Credentials</b>	6	6	6	4
<b>Scale</b>	7	7	7	7

Note: Shaded areas indicate variations from the overall and subgroup rankings.

### Percentage of Low-Income Students

Of the study's 177 respondents, 16 (9%) taught in schools with fewer than 25% low-income students, 26 (15%) taught in schools with fewer than 50% low-income students, 34 (19%) taught in schools with about 50% low-income students, 57 (32%) taught in schools with more than 50% low-income students, and 44 (25%) taught in schools with more than 75% low-income students. When the overall rankings of the seven indicators of teacher leadership were compared by the percentage of low-income students in respondents' schools, all teachers once again ranked *expertise* and *credibility* as the strongest two indicators of teacher leadership, regardless of their students' socioeconomic status (see Table 9). Similarly, teachers ranked *frequency* as the third or fourth strongest indicator and *credentials* as the fifth or sixth strongest indicator regardless of students' socioeconomic status.

**Table 9**

*Mean Rankings of Strongest to Weakest Indicators of Teacher Leadership by Percentage of Low-Income Students*

	Overall Rank	Fewer than 25%	26% to 50%	About 50%	51% to 74%	More than 75%
<b>Expertise</b>	1	1	1*	1	1*	1
<b>Credibility</b>	2	2	2*	2	2*	2
<b>Frequency</b>	3	3	3	3	4	3*

<b>Connections</b>	4	4	7	6	3	4*
<b>Variety</b>	5	5*	6	4	5	6
<b>Credentials</b>	6	6*	5*	5	6	5
<b>Scale</b>	7	7	4*	7	7	7

Note: Asterisks identify rankings with a tied mean, indicating that the rankings could be reversed (e.g., 6, 5 instead of 5, 6). Shaded areas indicate variations from the overall and subgroup rankings.

However, differences in perception emerged among teachers in schools with socioeconomic diversity. Teachers in schools with a 26% to 50% low-income student population ranked *scale* as the fourth strongest indicator of teacher leadership (as opposed a rank of 7 by teachers in all other groups) and *connections* as the seventh, or weakest, indicator of teacher leadership (as opposed to rankings of 3 or 4 by most other groups). Teachers in schools with populations of about 50% low-income students ranked *variety* as the fourth strongest indicator of teacher leadership (compared to rankings of 5 or 6 by all other groups) and *connections* as the sixth strongest indicator of teacher leadership (compared to rankings of 3 or 4 by most other groups.)

In other words, teachers in schools with populations of 26% to 50% low-income students and teachers in schools with populations of about 50% low-income students ranked *scale* and *variety* as stronger indicators of teacher leadership and *connections* as a weaker indicator of teacher leadership than teachers in schools with both lower and higher percentages of low-income students. This finding suggests that engaging in many different types of leadership on a larger scale is more likely to be recognized as teacher leadership in schools that have the greatest socioeconomic diversity.

### **Key Take Aways: Three School Demographics**

Comparing Illinois teachers' perceptions of teacher leadership by region of the state, school setting, and percentage of low-income students offers great insight regarding which indicators of teacher leadership Illinois teachers consider strong and which they consider weak.

#### ***Expertise, Credibility, and Frequency***

In all comparisons of school demographics, participating teachers agreed that *expertise* and *credibility* were the strongest indicators of teacher leadership. In other words, being known as an expert or a “go to” person and having a reputation as an exemplary teacher was how most Illinois teachers in this study recognized teacher leaders. Also across most comparisons, *frequency* emerged as the third strongest indicator of teacher leadership, although teachers from urban school settings ranked it as a weaker indicator. This finding suggests that engaging in acts of leadership often was noticed by most Illinois teachers in the study – but not all – as a relatively strong indicator of teacher leadership. These school demographic findings are consistent with the findings based on teacher characteristics.

### ***Connections and Variety***

Although *connections* ranked as the third or fourth indicator of teacher leadership across most comparisons, teachers in Northern Illinois and teachers in socioeconomically diverse school settings considered *connections* a weak indicator. This finding suggests that networking with others was viewed as an important aspect of teacher leadership among many – but not all – Illinois teachers in the study. In fact, teachers in schools with populations of 26% to 50% low-income students ranked *connections* as the weakest indicator of teacher leadership. This finding could suggest that in schools where teachers know everyone and/or lead on a smaller scale, networking is not a necessary – or not a recognized – aspect of teacher leadership.

While *variety* ranked as the fifth or sixth indicator of teacher leadership across most comparisons, teachers in Northern Illinois and teachers in socioeconomically diverse school settings considered *variety* a stronger indicator of teacher leadership. This finding directly mirrors the same teachers’ rankings of *connections*, suggesting that in schools with socioeconomically diverse student populations, engaging in many different kinds of leadership is more important to teachers – or more often recognized by teachers as leadership – than

networking with others. These findings are similar to the findings based on teacher characteristics.

### ***Credentials and Scale***

Although *credentials* ranked as the fifth or sixth indicator of teacher leadership across most school demographic comparisons, teachers in urban school settings considered *credentials* a slightly stronger indicator of teacher leadership while teachers in Northern Illinois considered it a weaker indicator. In fact, teachers in Northern Illinois ranked *credentials* as the weakest indicator of teacher leadership. This finding suggests that, for the most part, teacher leadership training and certification were not recognized by the Illinois teachers in this study as important qualifications for teacher leadership. *Expertise* and *credibility* trumped teacher leadership *credentials* across all comparisons.

In almost all comparisons, participating teachers agreed that *scale* was the weakest, or at least a weaker, indicator of teacher leadership, although teachers in Northern Illinois and teachers in socioeconomically diverse school settings considered *scale* slightly more important than other groups. So, the Illinois teachers in this study felt that coordinating large-scale projects and initiatives was not necessarily a stronger indicator of teacher leadership than leading individuals or small groups. Again, these findings are similar to the findings based on teacher characteristics.

### **Summary: Three School Demographics**

Based on the rankings of 177 teachers, *expertise* and *credibility* were the two strongest indicators of teacher leadership across school demographics, with *frequency* running a close third. *Connections* and *variety* fell somewhere in the middle, with *credentials* close behind. *Scale* emerged clearly as the weakest indicator.

### **Conclusion**

Even when teachers cannot articulate what teacher leadership is and what it is not, they “know it when they see it.” Therefore, this statewide study sought to address the question, which

indicators of teacher leadership do Illinois teachers consider strong and which do they consider weak? Findings revealed that across five teacher characteristics and three school demographics Illinois teachers recognized *expertise* and *credibility* as strong indicators of teacher leadership, closely followed by *frequency*. While *variety* and *connections* fell somewhere in the middle, *credentials* and *scale* emerged as the two weakest indicators. Although the study's survey response rate was small, these findings provide a glimpse into Illinois teachers' perceptions of teacher leadership and offer food for thought for readers seeking to better understand teacher leadership within and beyond Illinois. More research is needed.

### References

- Danielson, C. (2006). *Teacher leadership that strengthens professional practice*. ASCD.
- Hunzicker, J. (2023). Illinois teachers' perceptions of teacher leadership: Strong and weak indicators. *Illinois ASCD Quarterly Journal*, 49-61. Retrieved from <https://issuu.com/ilascdpublishing/docs/winter2022final>
- Hunzicker, J. L. (2022). Indicators of teacher leadership: Comparing Illinois teachers' perceptions. *Illinois School Board Journal*, 90(6), 22-26.
- Hunzicker, J. L. (2019). What makes a teacher a leader? *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 55(3),130-136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00228958.2019.1622384>
- Katzenmeyer, M. H., & Moller, G. V. (2009). *Awakening the sleeping giant: Helping teachers develop as leaders*, (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Merriam-Webster (2023). Indicator. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/indicator>
- Moller, G., & Pankake, A. (2006). *Lead with me: A principal's guide to teacher leadership*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education, Inc.
- National Education Association, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and the Center for Teaching Quality (2018). The Teacher Leadership Competencies. Retrieved from [https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/202007/NEA\\_TLCF\\_20180824.pdf](https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/202007/NEA_TLCF_20180824.pdf)
- Shea, D., Alemu, D. S., & Visser, M. J. (2020). A social network study of transformational teacher influence. *Teacher Development*, 24(5), 603-625. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2020.1818614>
- Smulyan, L. (2016). Stepping into their power: The development of a teacher leadership stance. *Schools: Studies in Education*, 13(1), 8-28. <https://doi.org/10.1086/685800>
- Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium (2012). Teacher Leader Model Standards. Retrieved from

[https://www.ets.org/s/education\\_topics/teaching\\_quality/pdf/teacher\\_leader\\_model\\_standards.pdf](https://www.ets.org/s/education_topics/teaching_quality/pdf/teacher_leader_model_standards.pdf)

York-Barr, J., & Duke, K. (2004). What do we know about teacher leadership? Findings from two decades of scholarship. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(3), 255-31.

<https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074003255>