

TEACHER LEADERS DIRECTLY IMPACT THE CLASSROOM

By Laura Roussel, NIET Senior Program Specialist and former Executive Master Teacher, Ascension Public Schools, Louisiana

My career as a teacher leader began in the classroom as a third-grade teacher where I spent eight years working next to eight-year-olds teaching all subjects. After several years of working in this role, I pursued my National Board Certification as a middle childhood generalist and was able to become certified within the first year of submitting my portfolio.

As a teacher, my reflections about my work slowly began to evolve from focusing on my own practices to focusing on how my practices yielded results for my students. This mindshift changed my daily reflections from “How did today’s lesson go?” to “How did today’s lesson impact student achievement?” All students that left my third-grade class showed significant gains. I began to collaborate and share with other teachers about how the practices that I chose were the practices that yielded the greatest gains for my students.

As I shared my practices with other teachers, I began to realize that leading from the middle, right there in the midst of the real work, is where I wanted to stay. I was a teacher leader. I instantly realized that no title could give me that honor. It was the work alongside my peers and our students that gave me this honor. Although I had received a master’s degree in educational leadership and was certified as a principal, I was drawn to the work that was in the classroom — in the “trenches.”

Soon, I was recruited as a master teacher in a failing school. After the school experienced several years of declining test scores, it was in jeopardy of being taken over by the state. Teachers were tired and untrusting that anything would work.

Since I valued the concept of leading by doing, I immediately found a spot in the classroom next to teachers and students. My day-to-day work as a master teacher consisted of working and teaching in many classes. I did not value simply visiting classes. I valued the work where my sleeves were rolled up and I was working alongside students and teachers. Teachers’ students became my students and *WE* began to work together to think about how our work was specifically impacting student achievement. I knew all 17 teachers’ students by name (over 200 students). I spent time talking about the students and their goals. I became strategic as I field-tested student strategies in order to ensure that these strategies would yield results, and then shared those strategies with teachers and students across the entire school.

As teachers tracked their data, we began to see a large number of students moving from one proficiency level to the next. This success built teachers’ belief that they could, in fact, positively impact student achievement. After the first year of working as a master teacher with these TAP structures, the school saw an eight-point gain. After three years, the school grew a total of 30 points and the culture of learning was revived. My work as a teacher leader was hard, but rewarding. I still wanted to stay as close to the work in the classroom as possible.

After three years of working as a master teacher, I moved into an executive master teacher position in which I supported 19 master teachers across eight TAP schools within Ascension Public Schools. Again, my work as an executive master teacher consisted of working alongside master teachers in classrooms with teachers and students. Although the scope of the work became larger, the focus did not change.



Laura Roussel leading a TAP Conference training session

My primary goal was to stay focused on the needs of the students as I worked closely with master teachers, mentor teachers and career teachers as they tracked student achievement, field-tested strategies, and shared practices in the classroom. Each day my work was embedded in a school with teachers and students. Whether I was field-testing alongside the master teacher, sitting in a leadership team meeting analyzing results, or co-leading clusters, the work was still in the trenches, right next to the students. Soon, these eight TAP schools in our district began to surpass other higher-performing schools. For example, in two years Pecan Grove Primary went from a D-label school to a B-label school. As a result, Ascension Parish was rated as the third highest-performing district in the state.

Even today, I pride myself in saying that I lead from the middle, as I work alongside educators in the classroom. I continue to sharpen my practices as a teacher of students and as a teacher of teachers. I invite any opportunity to analyze student work and field-test best practices. And most importantly, I have grown in my experience as an educator as I've watched my title change. My work still puts me directly in the place where I never want to leave ... the classroom. 🍀