



BUILDING A **STRUCTURE**

FOR TEACHER LEADERSHIP

by Lowell Milken

Most people can name at least one teacher who inspired them to succeed. For me, I was most fortunate to have a number of outstanding teachers during my years of schooling who left such an indelible impression that their legacies inform my work daily.

Two of these exceptional teachers were Mr. Fosse and Mr. Sutton whom I remember as warm and caring coaches yet firm and demanding instructors. They challenged me to aim high and become self-reliant. Much later, my work in creating a national program to recognize, celebrate and honor great educators, combined with intensive study of improving teaching practices, has taken me to all corners of the nation. Visiting more than 1,000 classrooms and observing and speaking with educators in every setting

imaginable, has led me to seeking an answer to the very important question: How can we create whole schools of Suttons and Fosses?

While those two individuals were powerful instructional teachers, they were not part of a structure within the school that allowed them to coach others and share best practices across the faculty on an ongoing basis. This shortcoming in the structure of schools could not have

been starker for me than when I visited the classroom of Illinois Milken Educator Catherine Schaller in 1996. I was struck by the fact that students in the next room were receiving a vastly different experience. This need for an ultimate structure that would develop, nurture, retain and motivate teacher leaders led to the early evolution of TAP and the educator effectiveness initiatives of the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET). Twenty years later, teacher leadership remains at the core of these initiatives.

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The term “teacher leader” takes on different meanings across education today. It can be an instructional coach, professional learning liaison or school policy advocate. But in TAP, it’s much more than that. What makes TAP’s teacher leadership system effective is the formalization, authority and increased responsibilities (with commensurate compensation) that come with the master and mentor teacher positions. These expert teacher leaders have the critical roles of driving instruction in the school and working alongside administrators to coach and evaluate other teachers. In addition to their distinguished responsibilities, they are given the time and authority to plan daily job-embedded professional learning, analyze data, field-test strategies, observe other classrooms, co-teach, conduct evaluations, provide detailed feedback to teachers and meet with administrators.

What’s more, the structure allows them to develop a pipeline of effective teachers who can step into leadership roles. The talent drawn from the skills, knowledge and experiences of these educators is thus generative and has the power to sustain instructional excellence and academic growth over the long term.

TAP research shows year after year that this structure is essential to improving teaching and learning. In 2017, 100 percent of administrators surveyed report that the professional growth activities, led by master and mentor teachers, improve instructional practice. Ninety-eight percent report high levels of collegiality, indicative of the teamwork TAP fosters to cultivate talent and leverage best practices across the board.

The most gratifying result of all is hearing from TAP educators themselves, who are encouraged to excel at higher levels because they now have the structure that supports them every step of the way. This finding is prevalent across every educational setting: urban, rural, suburban, private, charter or tribal.

I think of Traci Lust, an executive master teacher at Saydel Community School District in rural Iowa, who has held teacher leadership roles for a decade. Yet after implementing TAP in 2012, she noticed a distinct difference between TAP and previous initiatives. As she describes to me, “With other leadership experiences I’ve had, there wasn’t a clear system. Now we have focus: We have the instructional rubric that clearly describes the kinds of instructional improvements we want to make. Now we are looking at data, individual growth plans, weekly cluster meetings and evaluations. We are ensuring that those structures and processes are running smoothly and are having an impact. As a result, the leadership team is more purposeful.”

Building the structure for teacher leadership has also led to increased student achievement. Saydel experienced the largest growth in ACT scores in the district’s history. The TAP schools served as a pilot for the state Teacher Leadership and Compensation (TLC) System, which supports leadership opportunities and higher pay for teacher leaders.

In New Orleans, Louisiana, the TAP structure has not only improved teaching and learning within the school walls, but has also helped bring much needed unity to faculty, students and the community at large in Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath.

Brian Young, a former master teacher and now principal of Martin Behrman Charter School of Creative Arts and Sciences, was among the first educators to return to

New Orleans and rebuild his school after the storm. In a poignant essay in *Education Week*, Brian discusses how TAP's teacher leadership model and collaborative professional learning helped pull the school together — resulting in fourth-graders earning a 98 percent proficiency rate in English and a 96 percent proficiency rate in math after the first full year of the initiative.

TAP “gave us a common language of what effective teaching looks like and helped us communicate a clear understanding of where we were and where we needed to be,” Brian states. “During a time of chaos and unpredictability, TAP was our anchor. Having a structure of cohesion and support helped us to focus on what mattered most: the students.”

When a comprehensive and correct structure is put in place that addresses all of the issues of recruitment, professional development, retention and motivation, the environment is in place for everyone to excel. The opportunity to take on leadership roles allows teachers to

broaden their impact. This has been true for TAP Master Teacher Theresa Cross of nearby Alice Harte Charter School, whose staff and students have earned an “A” state rating for four consecutive years.

“Teacher leadership roles are very important in keeping top talent in the profession,” Theresa tells me. “Strong teachers want to have a bigger impact than just the students in their classroom. When a teacher knows that he or she has the option to move into a leadership role, it motivates them to not only stay in the profession, but also to produce amazing results by going the extra mile for their students.”

Indeed. A formalized structure for teacher leadership roles and responsibilities can affect transformational change in districts and schools across our nation. And in the process, provide a viable pathway to instructional excellence and student progress for decades to come. [▶](#)

