

ADVANCING THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER LEADER



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Research clearly shows that the effectiveness of the classroom teacher is the most important school-based factor in student achievement. So it's not surprising that states and districts are setting a higher bar for teaching, just as they have set higher expectations for students by establishing standards for learning aligned with the expectations of colleges and employers.

But the way to help teachers meet those expectations is to focus our energies on improving their skills, knowledge and experiences. To do so, we must give teachers honest, accurate feedback on their practice through integrated evaluation and professional development that provides powerful opportunities for teachers to reflect on their teaching and work on areas where they could improve. And who is better qualified to help them do that than fellow talented teachers?

This realization has begun to take hold over the past few years, and today, there is a growing consensus on the importance of teacher leadership.

But what does that really mean? How are teachers selected to be leaders? How are they trained, certified and held accountable for carrying out their responsibilities? How should the effectiveness of mentoring, coaching, modeling of techniques, and the productivity of facilitated professional conversations be measured?

Fifteen years ago, I began working with colleagues and nationally recognized educators on a way to give our best teachers a greater role in driving instructional excellence in their schools and districts. I thought about my experiences managing businesses and knew that, to attract, retain and motivate your best people, you have to give them considerable opportunities for career advancement by taking on new roles and responsibilities.

What resulted was a system originally called the Teacher Advancement Program, then renamed the TAP System. The TAP System provides all teachers—not just those who are struggling—with continuous feedback on their work as well as ongoing assistance to help them get better at what they do.

Crucially, it is trained and certified teacher leaders who provide valuable assistance. At schools where teachers elect to participate in the TAP System, we identify talented faculty leaders and give them a chance to become mentors. These teacher leaders influence the quality of instruction in a number of ways—field testing strategies to determine their impact on student learning; providing structure, accountability and leadership to weekly professional learning sessions; and providing individual coaching based on the kind of assistance each teacher needs. Mentors then have the opportunity to expand their influence even further and become master teachers. Master teachers who are freed up from day-to-day classroom responsibilities coach and support mentors, model lessons in classrooms and support other classroom teachers.

The teacher leaders also participate side-by-side with principals in an intense training sequence which prepares them to conduct accurate evaluations of the classroom performance of their colleagues. My associates and I believe this to be a great strength. In a very tangible way, these teacher

leaders contribute to the professionalization of teaching by setting high standards and ensuring they are met. The primary purpose of the evaluations is not to identify incompetence; it is to help everyone be as effective as possible.

Why do some object to the idea of teacher leaders serving as both evaluators and coaches for other teachers? One concern is that it would undermine collegiality in the building. Another is that the teacher leaders will go easy on their colleagues in an act of solidarity. For these reasons, these two important functions—coaching and evaluation—are almost always walled off from each other. Instead, evaluators from outside the school who help principals by observing teachers closely and repeatedly cannot share their insights with the coaches, whose job it is to help teachers improve. Coaches, meanwhile, cannot provide any input into evaluations. In some states, this policy is enshrined in law and regulation.

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Our experience over the past 15 years in a dozen states and hundreds of schools shows that these fears are unwarranted. We have found almost without exception that merging the support and evaluation of teachers actually increases levels of collegiality in schools. Teachers welcome the help of trained and certified mentor and master teachers and trust their judgment. An independent analysis released last year showed that 90 percent of teachers in TAP schools feel supported and are using what they learned from being evaluated to improve their teaching. The researchers report that teachers in TAP schools “accept an unusual amount of evaluation in return for an unusual amount of support.”

Also, we’ve analyzed the more than one million evaluations performed in TAP schools over the last 15 years, and, counter to conventional wisdom, the classroom observation scores of teacher leaders are highly correlative to those of administrators.

There are two more reasons why it makes sense for teacher leaders to help evaluate their colleagues. First, the evaluation training itself, and the experience of observing and analyzing other teachers as part of a leadership team, deepens and broadens the instructional expertise at a school. Why not develop this expertise within a school’s faculty rather than having to continue to rely solely on outside experts?

And, perhaps most important of all, new, more rigorous evaluation processes that are taking hold in many states require significant amounts of time for classroom observation. Without assistance from teacher leaders, principals simply do not have the time to conduct effective evaluations. If they involve teacher leaders in the process, they will be able to provide the meaningful feedback and support that teachers need and want.

The success of our schools and performance of our students hinge on our ability to ensure that teachers are able to improve their teaching skills and behaviors on an ongoing basis. We must be able to put in place models in which teachers can grow professionally to reach their potential. Teacher leaders are the best drivers of this change because of their demonstrated strengths connecting reflective practice to student learning growth. Teacher leaders are the key to shaping and implementing the requisite evaluation and support models that translate high expectations into effective instructional practices in every classroom.

