



# Teacher Leadership, Told Firsthand

*Insights from Teacher Leaders in Tennessee and Arizona*



**NIET**

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR  
EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING



hope street group



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## Summary

Teachers are increasingly seeking opportunities to have a greater impact on K-12 education both within and outside of their schools. The most recent MetLife survey of the American Teacher found 51 percent of teachers are interested in “teaching in the classroom part-time combined with other roles and responsibilities.”

Surveys of pre-service teachers have found that they have a strong interest in moving along a career path that offers a diversity of roles, including those allowing for leadership. In order to meet this growing expectation for career opportunities, states and districts have instituted a range of opportunities for teacher leadership. These different approaches raise questions about what truly works.

### Key Questions:

- ❖ *What kinds of leadership roles have an impact?*
- ❖ *Is there benefit in participating in more than one type of teacher leadership role?*
- ❖ *Does experience as a teacher leader within a school or district enhance a teacher’s interest and ability to engage in other leadership roles outside of their school?*

To explore these questions, the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET), a non-profit organization focused on school-based, instructionally-focused teacher leadership, and the Hope Street Group (HSG), a national non-profit focused on creating local, state and national

opportunities for teachers to engage in education leadership and advocacy with their peers, interviewed two experienced teacher leaders from Tennessee and Arizona.

**Lynnsey Metcalf** works at Sterchi Elementary School, and has been a teacher leader for six years in Knox County Public Schools in Knoxville, Tennessee. Knox County Schools began a partnership with NIET eight years ago in fourteen of its highest need schools. Lynnsey began her Hope Street Group Tennessee Teacher Fellowship in 2017, and served through May 2019.

**Nicole Wolff** is in her fifth year as a teacher leader at Desert Thunder Elementary School in the Avondale School District located in Phoenix, Arizona. Avondale partners with NIET to support the district’s school-based teacher leadership structures. Nicole was selected to serve in the first class of Hope Street Group Arizona Teacher Fellows from 2016 to 2017.

## Findings

Here is what we learned:

- ❖ Giving teachers a leadership role in supporting the professional learning of their peers, as well as student growth, and providing them with the authority, time and training to be successful, enables them to proactively engage in decision-making in their school buildings.
- ❖ Success in one leadership role empowers teachers with the confidence and knowledge to seek additional leadership opportunities outside of their school buildings.

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- ❖ Creating a platform and opportunity to share their voices in broader education decision-making elevates the impact of teacher leaders.
- ❖ Cohorts or networks of teacher leaders facilitate powerful adult learning experiences and lay the foundation for teachers to learn from each other and support systems change.
- ❖ The creation of leadership roles for teachers and the impact that teacher leaders have inspires other teachers to engage in leadership, even if they do not take on a formal role.

**These teacher leaders found that serving as a teacher leader in a school-based role built their expertise and confidence to think about opportunities outside the school and district.** For both teachers, their role in producing results with teachers and students in their school gave them a platform, and built their confidence to apply for the HSG fellowship and engage in advocacy for K-12 education and the teaching profession.

### Lynnsey Metcalf, Knox County Schools



Lynnsey Metcalf is a classroom teacher and instructional coach at Sterchi Elementary School in Knox County, Tennessee. She has worked in the Knox County School System for nine years, where she has held multiple roles including RTI Coordinator, School-level Technology

Ambassador, Certified Cognitive Coach®, TEAM Certified Evaluator as well as serving on the school leadership team.

Lynnsey is also a LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) Year-Long Reading Course Graduate.

Lynnsey earned both her B.S. in Interdisciplinary Studies K-6 and her M.A. in Reading and Reading Specialist from East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tennessee.

### Lynnsey's NIET Partnership Experience

Beginning in 2008 with four high need schools – and expanding over time to fourteen schools – Knox County Schools created teacher leadership positions designed to support collaborative professional learning and instructional coaching. At participating schools, teacher leaders were selected, trained and provided with the authority, time and resources to be successful in their roles. School-based teacher leaders supported fellow teachers by leading weekly professional learning groups and providing individual coaching in classrooms.

Teacher leaders participated weekly in their school leadership team with administrators to analyze data, identify academic learning goals, and create plans for supporting weekly learning groups for teachers to improve their skills and support student learning.

Teacher leaders also had release time to identify research-based instructional strategies and to “field test” strategies in classrooms to ensure they had an impact with students in the building.

The introduction of teacher leaders led to improvements in student classroom learning, providing a model for the district and, ultimately, the state.

The support Lynnsey and her colleagues provided made a difference. “The impact of teacher leadership in Knox schools is pushing teachers to be both more reflective and more proactive... creating a space and the support for teachers to think beyond their regular practices...giving them that experience of a new approach that pushes their thinking.”

Lynnsey summed up her leadership experiences: “Looking back, I used to be very reactive within my school, mostly responding to what others decided or thought. Even applying for a teacher leader role was something I only did through strong encouragement from others. But once I was in a leadership role, **I learned to be proactive – to figure out how I can solve a problem. It has made an enormous difference in my outlook and my ability to create positive change.**”

### What Did Teacher Leadership Change?

“Before, our professional learning was very top-down,” recalls Lynnsey. “Teachers were told, ‘This is what the district told us to do,’ and we did it. In contrast, now we get more teacher buy-in to the professional learning – since teacher leaders who lead weekly professional learning are going into classrooms and trying the things we are telling teachers to do, and showing it can move student achievement with their kids.”

“Teacher leaders are being vulnerable, saying, ‘Hey, this is what I did – I am not saying it will be perfect but this worked for me with these adjustments and here is why you should try it’.”

### Challenges

“For me the biggest challenge to being a teacher leader was being out of my classroom. I was a lead teacher with a full time classroom and several hours a week of release time for observation and support of other teachers. I was very lucky in finding someone who subbed for me every single time I was out doing an observation. But that is not the case for everybody. When I was feeling pressure, the biggest reason was being away from my students since my students are my number one concern,” says Lynnsey.

“Now, I am in a teacher leader role that is full-time released, and while I don’t have my own classroom, I support multiple teachers and classrooms. Children are my passion and I had to really reflect on giving up my own classroom, but I was drawn to reach more students.

I am now supporting 30 teachers who are touching over 450 students every day so I am making a difference in a broader way. That said, I had the opportunity to be district level coach that I turned down. I like to be in a school with a group of colleagues, where I can stay connected to students.”

### Mentor Role

“The power of the school-based teacher leader who retains their own classroom and serves as a mentor to others, is that they are in the mix, they are in it day in and day out,” says Lynnsey. “Another thing that was a huge benefit of a mentor role for me was to see other teachers teach. I never had the chance to do that before.”

“In my role as mentor I got to go into classrooms, observe what others were doing, to then take what I learned and share what is working with other teachers. The peer observation portion of my role as mentor was very beneficial, and still is as an instructional coach. I learn so many things from watching other teachers.”

Reflecting on what impact the opportunity for a leadership role provided her personally, Lynnsey elaborates: “I can say I definitely wanted to be in education my entire life. My dad was a teacher and administrator.”

“However when I first started there were some very tough times. I was in a tough school and one thing that kept me going was my administrator gave me small opportunities to be a leader. I wasn’t thinking of climbing a career ladder at that time, but those roles built my self-confidence. **If someone believes in you and what you are doing, you begin to believe more in yourself.**”

### Lynnsey’s Hope Street Group Teacher Fellow Experience

Lynnsey was looking to build a larger network outside of her school and district. She explained, “I had been looking for some kind of professional growth, and my principal sent me information on the Hope Street Group fellowship. I really wanted to build my network, which at the time consisted of teachers in the three Knox County schools where I had worked, and a couple of teachers I knew from church. I wanted to build a larger network and that is why I applied for the fellowship.”



Tennessee HSG Fellows after a meeting with then-Commissioner of Education, Candice McQueen, who is now CEO of NIET.

The cultivation and engagement of a broad professional learning network is one of the tenets of the HSG Teacher Fellows program in Tennessee and its other past and current states of operation (Arizona, Hawaii, Kentucky, North Carolina and Utah).

Through competency-based professional learning modules led by Teacher Fellow alumni, Fellows learn how to assess their actual and potential network members before they call on these peers to participate in focus groups and surveys related to timely education topics.

Building trust and credibility with peers allows Teacher Fellows to gather rich data, and to also share these data with additional stakeholders at the local and state levels, all the while broadcasting their expertise on social media and through published blogs and op-eds.

Face-to-face and virtual convenings of the diverse cohorts of Teacher Fellows provide rich peer learning experiences, joining educators of different grades, subjects, geographies and teaching tenures to share with each other.

These expanded networking opportunities and professional connections have been the biggest benefit of Lynnsey's fellowship experience with HSG. "I have names and numbers of teachers across the state, working in grades K through 12, that I can call with any question. I participated in the April 2018 Teach to Lead summit and met teachers from across the country. It was really incredible to see my network expand. **My network went from three schools in Knox County to a network across the state, and now beyond Tennessee.**"

Lynnsey continues, "The benefit of the [expanded] network is it makes me more versatile as a leader. I have taught grades 3 through 6 but I need help supporting my Kindergarten, 1st and 2nd grade teachers. If I am working with a teacher in those grades who is struggling, I can call someone in my network and ask for their help. Being in the [HSG] fellowship and building this network made me feel more confident in what I am doing in Knox County."

### Lynnsey's Teacher Leadership Lessons Learned

"Experiencing both of these teacher leadership roles definitely had an impact on me," Lynnsey reflected. "You have to be confident in what you do. Both of these roles built this in different ways."

"When you are able to say you have experience as a teacher leader in your school, and use that experience as the foundation for advocating for the profession [at the local and state levels], it gives you more credibility. You have actually lived what you are talking about."

### Lessons Learned

- ❖ The importance of learning to be proactive and to impart this to other teachers.
- ❖ The importance of having your classroom covered by an effective teacher when you need to be out for your leadership responsibilities.
- ❖ You need to be vulnerable and dig into the actual work in classrooms in order to build buy-in and trust from teachers to make changes in their practice.

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### Nicole Wolff, Avondale Elementary School District



Nicole Wolff has served as a teacher leader since 2014 at Desert Thunder Elementary School in the Avondale Elementary School District located in Phoenix, Arizona. Nicole has spent her 17 year career working with diverse students, as well as instructing at the University level.

Her dedication to teacher advocacy and support led her to become an Instructional Coach in 2013. She became a Master Teacher in 2014, and has served in that role for the last five years. She has spent her career actively involved in instructional improvement, chairing many committees including Response to Intervention, Academic Accountability and Professional Development Committees. Nicole was named Dysart Hero (teacher of the year) in 2012.

Nicole earned a Bachelor's in Elementary Education and a Master's in Education/ESL from Ottawa University. She is also endorsed as an Early Childhood Specialist, Reading Specialist and Gifted Specialist. Nicole became a National Board Certified Teacher in 2018.

### Nicole's NIET Partnership Experience

Avondale first partnered with NIET eight years ago to raise the capacity and skills of its teaching faculty. The partnership has expanded to include Arizona State University's pre-service teacher preparation program.

Nicole has served as a Master teacher for five years, having worked before that in another district where she was an instructional coach. Compared to her prior coaching experience, her current teacher leadership role provides a greater focus and coherence to professional learning, and has resulted in substantial student achievement gains.

Nicole explains, "Instead of 'one and done' professional development, teachers work in small groups to analyze student work, create measurable goals for their students, learn specific strategies for meeting student needs, review results and make adjustments each week. There is much more focus and collaboration, and we make sure student learning is measurably increasing. **Teachers better understand the direct link between how they teach and what students learn.**"

She described her initial experience, "I was coming from outside the district and it was a little challenging in the beginning to step in as a teacher leader. I jumped into field testing student strategies right away and did it with a veteran teacher. She was a person who was nearing the end of her career and not looking to significantly change her teaching practice. She had a 2nd grade class of 37 students with low academic achievement. She was just hanging on. I chose to work with her, thinking, 'if I can show student achievement gains with this class, I can get buy-in from anyone.' I spent 6 weeks in her classroom," Nicole explained.

“Because her class came in with such low achievement, the students were underestimated. Over the 6 weeks, she watched me implementing strategies, quickly began implementing them with me, and saw her students progressing. She saw with her own eyes that they were capable of more. She even began using the strategies across content areas. That was a breakthrough.”

Nicole elaborates on the impact of the NIET-supported teacher leader role. “I had been an instructional coach in a prior district and had just gotten my feet wet when the position was eliminated. I wanted to see what else was out there.”

“My current position as master teacher has been powerful. It has made me more confident in sharing my ideas and coming up with a plan. We don’t always give classroom teachers that confidence in themselves and the freedom to try to implement something new.”

“Without the teacher leader role it is really hard to change that mindset. I do think that structure and role is critical; once you start moving up it gives you more credibility. You get listened to more. Having a formal leadership role makes it easier to do things.”

### Nicole’s Hope Street Group Teacher Fellow Experience

“One of my colleagues said, ‘You should apply for the Hope Street Group fellowship,’” remembers Nicole. “I read the description and realized why she sent it to me: I am passionate about policy and believe teachers need a bigger voice. I met with her and we brainstormed ideas for the application. I was intimidated.”

Once accepted into the inaugural cohort of Arizona Teacher Fellows in 2017, however, Nicole settled into what the professional learning and peer networking offered her in career development. “The experience of being a fellow was amazing,” she says.

**“Learning how to frame my ideas and communicate effectively based on my audience was my biggest lesson.** I learned to be assertive and that it is OK to seek people out and to speak out. The bond with the other Fellows was so strong – we are in communication still and continuing with our advocacy together.”

“The year I served with Hope Street Group was the year that Arizona teachers marched on the state capitol to demand increases in education funding. My fellowship cohort visited the state Capitol and met with legislators. None of us would have done that prior to the fellowship,” says Nicole.<sup>1</sup>

“We were trained in how to communicate with decision-makers. At the time I thought, ‘this doesn’t help me, I don’t know who to contact.’ But once those opportunities came, all of us were thinking, ‘let’s do this, let’s make a presentation.’ Light bulb moment: when we suddenly were faced with the opportunity to engage, we knew what to do.” Nicole gets specific about those opportunities that arose in 2017 and early 2018.

<sup>1</sup>While HSG, a nonpartisan nonprofit, does not organize teachers to lobby for particular issues, policies or candidates, the leadership training of the program does aim to build an educator’s confidence in articulating his or her expertise, connecting their frontline experiences in schools with the broader education ecosystem.

“When the ‘Red for Ed’ movement started, I organized meetings and events outside the school day, and brought 80% of the teachers from my school to the capitol. Almost all of them were hearing about the details of school funding for the first time.”

“Now they are so much more invested and interested in education policy in Arizona. Before this we had no voice, so no one heard us. We didn’t know our state chief or our county superintendent of education. That has changed. I am particularly excited that we are reviving our local teacher organization to serve as a forum for ideas and change – this will help us sustain our efforts.”

### The Combined Effects of School and State Leadership

“The NIET partnership and HSG Fellowship were both such powerful experiences for me because before taking on a leadership role, I felt I was stagnating and not getting better at what I was doing,” says Nicole.

“For me there was not an opportunity or incentive to further myself professionally. I didn’t want to be a principal – you miss the magic of the classroom. But I was really starting to think about what else I could do to get my passion going again and not feel like I was just running on the treadmill.

**Teacher leadership gave me that passion back. It opened my eyes to so many things I could do.”**

She goes on: “Learning to be an effective school-based teacher leader with support from NIET made me more focused and more detail-oriented.”

“My HSG Fellowship experience was similar. I always had so many ideas, but I learned I needed to focus on one thing with one person.”

“From my experience, teacher leaders feel so much more empowered and willing to take more risks. They feel more trusted and safe in speaking out.” Nicole connects disempowered to not just an absence of advocacy for students and for the profession, but for weaker instruction, too. “Our classroom teachers typically don’t have that sense of empowerment or trust. They play it safe. So as a result, we get mediocre teaching.”

“How can we improve our structures so that all teachers take risks? I believe my coming into the classroom of that overwhelmed 2nd grade teacher helped her take more risks. She had been an innovative teacher, but an innovative spirit can be lost under the pressures of the classroom. Together we worked to reignite that innovative spirit in her teaching. Through our work, she saw what was possible for her students, and she was a dream to work with.”

### Lessons Learned

- ❖ Collaboration is key: I gained skills in working collectively to achieve common goals.
- ❖ Have the courage to use your teacher voice in your school, district and state. If we won’t raise our voices then we are giving permission to others to make decisions for us.
- ❖ The importance of training and learning new skills, and in doing so, gaining a new perspective. When you get out of your space, you see a problem differently.

Teacher leadership is rightfully a growing focus for states and districts, as well as for national organizations looking to support improvements in classroom instruction and student learning.

To learn more about how the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching and Hope Street Group develop teacher leaders visit:

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