



UNLEASHING TEACHER LEADERSHIP

How Formal Teacher Leader Roles Can
Improve Instruction and Accelerate Learning

Today's teachers increasingly demand opportunities to take on non-administrative leadership roles that enable them to have a broader impact beyond their own classrooms. And the past decade has seen a growing attention to and investment in teacher leadership among national organizations and state policymakers.

The National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) has been a pioneer in this work for two decades, having directly trained more than 30,000 new teacher leaders alone. Research has shown, and NIET's experience confirms, that school-based strategies can improve teaching and accelerate learning when they offer teacher participation in structured collaborative learning, job-embedded professional development and coaching, and growth-oriented evaluation that includes more frequent feedback based on classroom observations.

In school systems supported by NIET, expert teachers take on instructional leadership positions such as the following:

MENTOR TEACHER: Teacher leaders who remain embedded in their own classrooms as “teachers-of-record” for one or more classes of students while also spending several hours per week working with a group of colleagues to improve teaching and learning.

MASTER TEACHER: Teacher leaders who are released from all or most regular classroom teaching duties in order to provide instructional leadership for up to 15 of their colleagues.

Policymakers and education system leaders who invest in formal instructional teacher leadership need to carefully consider how to do so in ways that will best sustain teacher leadership and maximize its benefits for instruction and learning. Based on lessons learned, NIET offers the following advice:

1. Design formal teacher leadership responsibilities to encompass all of the main schoolwide systems for improving instruction.

Formal instructional leadership roles for teachers should be designed to focus on addressing the most pressing need in education — the gap in school-level capacity to systematically and reliably improve teaching and accelerate student learning. To accomplish that, the roles should give teacher leaders significant responsibility for managing and implementing research-proven, high-impact levers for improving instruction: leading collaborative learning teams, conducting formal observations to provide useful feedback to teachers, and ensuring that all teachers benefit from classroom-based coaching.

2. Leverage teacher leadership to create coherence across major instructional improvement initiatives.

Surveys show that teachers are suffering from “reform fatigue,” not only because of the amount of change they are being asked to accommodate, but also because new initiatives are frequently rolled out to teachers across multiple platforms in disconnected ways. Many of NIET’s school system partners have found that formal instructional teacher leadership roles offer a strategic opportunity to quell the cacophony and create more coherence. Teacher leaders can go first, field-testing new strategies in real classrooms with real students, and they can leverage school-based professional development to help teachers integrate new strategies into their own classroom practice.

3. Establish multiple, interconnected leadership positions to increase opportunity, reach and impact.

Decision-makers should consider creating multiple, interconnected teacher leadership roles that are sequenced in a career ladder. Among other benefits, such an approach creates more opportunities for expert teachers to take on formal instructional leadership roles. It also expands schoolwide instructional leadership capacity in ways that enable more teachers to benefit from the focused, job-embedded support teacher leaders provide.

4. Emphasize that formal instructional teacher leadership roles enhance, rather than limit, opportunities for all staff to engage in leadership.

Research and experience have shown that leadership is not a zero-sum quantity in schools, and formal instructional teacher leadership positions enhance, rather than limit, opportunities for administrators and for all other teachers to engage in leadership. However, because of misconceptions about formal teacher leadership roles, policymakers and system leaders need to communicate this up front.

5. Select teacher leaders who have the right set of accomplishments, skills and dispositions to succeed.

Formal instructional teacher leadership roles are not honorifics bestowed on more senior teachers with long experience in a particular district or school. They are highly demanding positions that require exceptional levels of expertise and a deep commitment to the unique nature of “hybrid” leadership. It is important that such leaders be competitively selected from a robust candidate pool based on explicit job-related criteria.

6. Provide teacher leaders with training and ongoing support focused on specific job responsibilities.

Teachers who take on formal instructional leadership roles require specialized training and ongoing support to fulfill new responsibilities they will not have encountered before. The most effective training and support will be targeted to specific responsibilities of the role — whether leading collaborative teams or conducting formal observations to provide instructional feedback.

7. Empower teacher leaders by adopting common tools and protocols, including a research-based instructional framework or rubric.

Far from stifling creativity or stymieing initiative, such tools provide teacher leaders with critical scaffolding for doing their jobs well, and they relieve new teacher leaders from having to “reinvent the wheel.”

8. Create and protect release time during the week for teacher leaders to lead, and give them enough time to build trust and long-term relationships that enable success. Teacher leaders need sufficient, predictable and dedicated release time to fulfill their specific job responsibilities every day and every week. Moreover, it takes time for teacher leaders to develop the relationships, trust and credibility necessary to realize maximum impact on classroom practices and student learning.

9. Make more strategic use of existing resources to fund formal teacher leadership positions. NIET's partner districts have found they can pay for formal teacher leadership positions, even when dedicated state or federal funds are not available, if they can make more strategic use of their existing resources. First, district leaders can repurpose spending on budget items that are not producing measurable improvements in instruction and student learning. Second, they can use school-based teacher leadership positions to "in-source" professional development, repurposing

funds that previously had been spent on expensive outside providers in order to deliver more relevant job-embedded learning for all teachers.

10. Place teacher leaders at the school level, but expect districts to play a key role in sustaining and leveraging teacher leadership for maximum impact. Formal instructional teacher leadership positions are best embedded at the school level, enabling teacher leaders to build and capitalize on deep relationships with the teachers they lead and support. However, districts play a critical role in establishing, sustaining and leveraging formal teacher leadership to achieve maximum impact. District-level leadership is especially crucial when it comes to recruitment and hiring of teacher leaders, providing ongoing support for teacher leaders, funding and sustaining teacher leadership positions, and leveraging teacher leadership to create coherence across districtwide improvement initiatives. **D**

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