



HOW TEACHERS CAN LEAD FROM THE CLASSROOM

BY RENEE GUGEL

As an administrator, I wanted to be — longed to be, even — an instructional superhero. Like all school leaders, I knew how important it is to help our teachers become the best they can be. But with responsibilities and to-do

lists far longer than there are hours in a day, my best intentions often went unfulfilled. I found I was barely managing to get into classrooms to work with teachers, and even when I did, those meetings were rushed. It became clear to me that school leaders can't do instructional leadership alone.

I have since learned that the quality instructional leadership our school needed was right in front of me, but I failed to recognize it at the time. Empowering teacher leadership is a way to share responsibility for improving instruction and for teachers to pursue leadership opportunities without

TEACHER LEADERS' ROLES

Across the United States, teacher leadership takes on a variety of meanings. Some teacher leader roles include:

- Technology coach
- Instructional coach
- New teacher mentor
- Staff development/professional development leader
- Curriculum developer/specialist
- Peer evaluator (informal)
- Department chair
- Grade-level leader
- Lead teacher
- Data coach
- PLC leader
- Community partnership liaison

leaving their classrooms. Teachers are asking for opportunities to grow, make more contributions to their schools, and be recognized as experts, but not all of them want to be administrators. Teacher leadership is a win-win situation.

Now leading a teacher leadership program at the university level, I know both the benefits of teacher leadership and the challenges to making it more widespread. To grow our schools' cadre of teacher leaders, school administrators need to have a clear understanding of teacher leaders' roles and contributions, recognize and remove barriers, and listen to the voices of teachers.

GROWING TEACHER LEADERS

Just because teachers don't choose to get a degree in administration does not mean they are not interested in leadership opportunities. In many cases, the opposite is true. Teachers who crave more leadership responsibilities but don't want to leave the classroom are often left with few options. Even when teacher leadership positions are available, many teachers don't know about them or have chances to develop the skills to succeed in them.

Teacher leadership programs at higher education institutions fill this

gap. These programs have sprung up over the last 15 years at colleges and universities across the U.S. They help teachers learn how to become leaders in their schools and districts without formally becoming administrators or leaving their classrooms. A teacher does not need to enroll in a formalized program to become a teacher leader in their school, but they benefit enormously from opportunities to develop their leadership skills, and structured programs can provide that.

In these programs, teachers are able to network with like-minded peers, share ideas, and bring those outside ideas into their own schools. They take courses, including some that my program offers such as Guiding Data Teams in Schools, Teacher Outreach: Families and Communities, and Mentoring and Coaching Fellow Teachers. They also take on action research as they tackle problems of practice in their buildings. They learn and practice the skills they need to be successful leaders among their colleagues.

In 2008, a consortium of teachers, education leaders, and institutions came together to "think about the critical leadership roles that teachers play in contributing to student and school

success" and developed a set of Teacher Leader Model Standards (National Network of State Teachers of the Year, 2008).

The purpose of the standards was to elucidate the knowledge, skills, and competencies that teachers need to succeed in leadership roles. These are divided into seven domains that encompass a range of competencies from fostering a collaborative culture, to promoting professional learning, to community outreach, to advocating for the teaching profession.

Yet many administrators still didn't know what teacher leadership was, as I discovered when I began my role leading a teacher leadership program in Illinois. They could generalize the idea, of course, but did not understand the extent of the roles teacher leaders can take or the impact they can have on teaching and learning.

In 2018, when I began my teacher leadership advocacy work, about half of the administrators I spoke with didn't know that our state had adopted teacher leadership as a formalized endorsement a teacher may obtain along with their professional educator's license. Although recognition has grown since then, many administrators still do not know about the Illinois Teacher Leader

AN EXAMPLE OF BENEFITS OF TEACHER LEADERSHIP FOR SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

Dr. Washington, the district superintendent, has asked all the schools in the district to improve parental involvement. He is especially concerned about Birch Elementary, where there has been a decrease over the last few years.

Birch's principal, Ms. Sprague, knows how important this goal is, but feels overwhelmed with other responsibilities and wonders where to start. She realizes this is an excellent chance to promote teacher leadership. She turns to Mrs. Smith, a 3rd-grade teacher, who consistently has the strongest relationships with families. She is an expert at finding ways to make them feel welcome and solicit their input and feedback.

Ms. Sprague asks Mrs. Smith to help lead a committee on parental involvement and provide some tips for other teachers about how to welcome families. The situation is a win for everyone. Ms. Smith feels appreciated and recognized for her expertise, other teachers have new strategies for engaging families, and more parents are connecting with their children's teachers.

Working together, Ms. Sprague and Mrs. Smith are able to accomplish an important school and district goal while creating a culture of community and collaboration.

Endorsement. There is a need to better communicate the contributions of teacher leadership.

BARRIERS TO TEACHER LEADERSHIP

Unfortunately, lack of awareness is not the only barrier to growing the field of teacher leadership. Despite the benefits for teachers and schools, some states are discouraging formalized teacher leadership programs as principal shortages and concerns about the principal pipeline continue to grow.

In Illinois, the principal shortage is well-documented, along with contributing factors such as elaborate evaluation processes, new degree requirements, little state-to-state reciprocity, inadequate social and emotional support, and a lack of incentives (Rosborg, 2022). But discouraging teacher leadership can have unintended negative consequences.

Depriving principals of opportunities to distribute leadership could actually drive more administrators out of the profession. How can we retain principals who are trying to do everything alone because they don't have the support they need? Plus, some teachers ultimately

become interested in the principalship after dipping their toes in the waters of teacher leadership, so discouraging these programs can cut off the principal pipeline at an important point in the process. Furthermore, teachers who want to lead from their classrooms and are denied that chance may leave the profession, exacerbating teacher shortages.

Another barrier is a negative or misguided perception of teacher leadership. In Illinois, very few districts recognize the Teacher Leader Endorsement in hiring or salary structures (Teach Plus, 2021). This may be related to the fact that at some institutions, the Teacher Leader Endorsement is "perceived as a lesser version of the administrative credential, rather than a unique program geared toward teacher leaders" (Teach Plus, 2021).

When teachers see that their desire to lead from a nonadministrative role is not as respected, they become frustrated and feel undervalued. Here again, by not recognizing the importance of teacher leader roles, we inadvertently create fewer leaders, exactly the opposite of the good intentions of policymakers.

In some cases, an additional

challenge is fulfilling the requirements of the Teacher Leader Endorsement because of a lack of support from districts. In Illinois, many candidates for the endorsement complete clinical hours in which they engage in hands-on leadership in their schools. This requires support from school leadership.

Although some candidates find their administrators are encouraging and enthusiastic, many others feel defeated and disheartened when they find their requests brushed aside. With these candidates, it is a struggle to find ways to fulfill the clinical hour requirement, and for some, it sparks a realization that it may be time to move on to a school that values teacher leadership.

LISTENING TO TEACHER VOICES

One of the best avenues to overcome these barriers and build more understanding is for school administrators to listen to teacher leaders and learn about the many ways they are impacting their schools.

In my current role, I conduct a workshop with administrators from all over Illinois where we discuss the value of implementing a quality teacher leadership culture in their buildings. Here are some things administrators

share after spending the day looking at resources and discussing teacher leadership with their colleagues.

- “I didn’t realize how many options there are for teachers who want to lead but who do not want to be an administrator.”
- “Having a common definition of teacher leadership is a good start to creating positions that will impact student outcomes.”
- “Teacher leadership is an important pipeline for building future leaders.”
- “I need to find a way to include teacher leaders in decision-making.”
- “The power of teacher leadership is so impactful, and finding ways to increase those opportunities is critical for school improvement.”

I also encourage leaders to talk directly with teacher leaders. These teachers’ experiences and insights are powerful. That is obvious in these two responses to our teacher leadership program’s exit survey:

- “This school year, I was asked by my administration to be a part of the teacher leadership team. ... It has given me more of a leadership role in the school. I am helping to peer-observe and coach our new teachers, and I have gotten to help restructure our faculty meetings.”
- “I don’t know what I expected when I started this [teacher leadership] journey, but what I ended up with was confidence. Confidence not only in my teaching abilities, but also in my leadership abilities. I’ve also seen myself get involved in ways I never would have in the past. Because of this journey, my colleagues and administrators see me in a way they did not previously.”

Most administrators I have met are not intentionally undervaluing teacher leadership. Sometimes they just need to be reminded that teacher leaders are change agents who can and will make a tremendous impact on teaching and learning in our schools if we create

an environment that allows them to do so. To those administrators, I say: You know your teachers’ strengths. Capitalizing on those strengths will benefit you, the teachers, and most importantly, the students.

REFERENCES

National Network of State Teachers of the Year. (2008). *Teacher Leader Model Standards*. Author.

Rosborg, J. (2022). *Teacher/administrator shortage: A commentary on how we got here, and our road to solving the problem*. Illinois Association of School Boards.

Teach Plus. (2021, January 7). *Tapping the potential of Illinois’ teacher leadership endorsement*. teachplus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/teach_plus_il_tle.pdf

Renee Gugel (rgugel1@nl.edu) is program chair of teacher leadership and assistant professor, leadership studies at National Louis University in Chicago, Illinois. ■

Are you listening to midcareer teachers’ needs?

Continued from p. 27

one-size-fits-all format that might better support inducting new educators into the system.

This approach is detrimental to meaningfully engaging midcareer teachers in their own continuous improvement. The midcareer professional development design framework is intended to keep midcareer teachers engaged in their continuous improvement and ultimately to support the design of better learning experiences for their students.

REFERENCES

Burke, P.J., Christensen, J.C., Fessler, R., McDonnell, J.H., & Price, J.R. (1987, April). *The teacher career cycle: Model development and research report*. Paper presented at the annual

meeting of the American Educational Research Association

Carstensen, L.L. (2006). The influence of a sense of time on human development. *Science*, 312(5782), 1913-1915.

Fessler, R. & Christensen, J. (1992). *The teacher career cycle: Understanding and guiding the professional development of teachers*. Allyn & Bacon.

Huberman, M. (1989) The professional life cycle of teachers. *Teachers College Record*, 91(1), 31-57.

Knowles, M.S., Holton, E.F., Swanson, R.A., & Robinson, P.A. (2020). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development*. Routledge.

Lynn, S. (2002). The winding path: Understanding the career cycle

of teachers. *The Clearing House*, 75(4), 179-182.

Reichel, J. (2023). *Don’t waste my time: Characteristics of professional development that mid-career teachers say they need*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of St. Thomas]. ir.stthomas.edu/caps_ed_lead_docdiss/183

Shavit, Y., Chi, K., & Carstensen, L. (2022). Age and time horizons are associated with preferences for helping colleagues. *Work, Aging and Retirement*, 9(3), 280-290.

Jennifer Reichel (jennreichel@gmail.com) is director of teaching and learning for Mahtomedi Public Schools in Minnesota and an adjunct professor in the educational leadership and learning department at the University of St. Thomas. ■