

Who can be a Teacher Leader?

Broadening the Definition in New Bedford Public Schools

For several years, New Bedford Public Schools has benefitted from having coaches who offer academic support directly to students. We have seen the value of having a team of prepared interventionists who can tailor instruction to students' needs and teachers find value in the role as a way to grow professionally.

However, when we looked at our data for the 2013-14 school year, we saw a clear need to focus in on literacy instruction, particularly at our Level 3 and Level 4 schools. To address that need, we re-envisioned our coaching role. Under our new vision, Teaching and Learning Specialists would support teachers, rather than providing direct student interventions.

During the 2014-15 school year, we saw these new Teaching and Learning Specialists (TLSs) take off. They worked hard at helping teachers feel comfortable by stressing that conversations between TLSs and teachers would remain confidential. We also rolled out the program by allowing teachers to request their support, rather than being recommended for support by a supervisor.

We were undoubtedly pleased with what we were seeing, but the progress we were making felt too slow and too narrow, especially since only a small subset of schools had TLSs. So, we began to think: ***How can we take what is working so well – teacher-to-teacher support – and expand it to more classrooms and schools?***

What is a teacher leader?

The TLSs were selected through an application process. First and foremost, these teachers had to have strong instructional practices as evidenced by evaluation ratings, administrator recommendations, and demonstrated student growth and achievement. Also, they had to be skilled at working with their peers, including



observing practice, conducting pre- and post-observation conversations, and modeling effective instruction.

Those two qualities – being a strong teacher of students *and* a strong teacher of peers – are what many teacher leadership roles coalesce around. The route we had originally gone when thinking about teacher leadership was very “traditional” in many ways: we wrote a job description with detailed qualifications, selected teachers to fill that role, supported and trained them once in that role, and compensated them for their extra time and expertise. That model helped ensure that we had fantastic TLSs who are effective in supporting their peers and who feel valued by both the training and the compensation we give them.

However, that model is also time- and resource-intensive and yields an overall small pool of teacher leaders. So, we knew we had to think a little outside the box.

Opening New Doors to Leadership

We talked to both TLSs and the teachers with whom they worked to see if we could figure out the “main ingredients” that were making this model work. When we talked to TLSs, we heard how much they felt they had personally grown as teachers, just by being able to be in a variety of classrooms. They spoke about how watching someone else teach had helped them to reflect more on their own practice and even had been “rejuvenating.” When we talked to teachers who had been on the receiving end of the support, we heard how reassuring it was to have a peer come in and identify things that were working as well as offer new suggestions. They spoke about the confidence they gained by having a peer in their classroom and also how essential it was to have a trusting relationship.

These two ingredients – the chance to just *be* in someone else’s classroom and trust – seemed fairly replicable and we began to envision what it might look like to allow more teachers to simply have time to visit other teachers’ classrooms. We envisioned that this would broaden teachers’ idea of who could be a teacher leader and it would also spread the positive effects of peer observation to more teachers and more schools.

Learning Labs: The Basics

To try this out, we worked with K-5 teachers in four elementary schools to create Learning Labs. Basically, any classroom could be a Learning Lab as long as the teacher had a practice that he or she was willing to share. We created a job description, protocols for observations, and forms that teachers could fill out to request visits.

Protocols for observation: This was a huge factor in developing trust. We wanted all teachers to have clear boundaries when it came to conducting

Job Description

While we wanted to broaden our pool of teacher leaders, we also wanted to ensure that there was a baseline of effective practice that would be happening in a Learning Lab. The job description was not overly complicated. It centered around one idea: *What are you doing in your classroom that you are proud of and can share with others?* We purposefully oriented the Labs around the positive, as we hoped to build a culture around sharing what is working.

Specific qualifications include:

- Sound knowledge of grade level curriculum and core standards
- Reflective practitioner
- Willingness to have their classroom visited
- Minimum of three years of teaching experience
- Sign Memorandum of Understanding

observations. To achieve this, the protocol begins with a “pre-visit share” in which the Learning Lab host shares the lessons’ objectives, contextual information, location of the lesson within the gradual release of responsibility model, assessment components, and other information. Thus, the host has the chance to frame the visit first. When visitors enter the classroom, they have a graphic organizer that asks: What did you see? What did you hear? What does this prompt you to think, wonder, question? and My next steps: Adapt / Adopt.

Request form: Like the TLS role, we knew it would be important to allow teachers to self-identify as wanting to learn from their peers. We wanted to make the process easy for anyone to do, regardless of whether a teacher had a lot of areas

of need or whether a teacher simply wanted to be “rejuvenated” by getting into a different classroom.

For this pilot program, we chose to work in schools where all principals committed to making the logistics work. In some cases, this meant that principals themselves covered classes so that teachers could go on a Learning Lab visit. Other times, principals helped manage the schedule so that teachers could go during their planning periods.

Learning Labs: The Launch

We launched Learning Labs by sending out a memo to teachers at the four pilot schools. Teachers’ reactions were reluctant at first. Some teachers expressed not wanting to take on more work or add more meetings to their already-busy schedule. We also heard some teachers express a sense of fear – they were not sure what they would be getting themselves into.

We were somewhat surprised to learn just how modest teachers could be. In some cases, teachers who we knew to be strong instructional leaders were hesitant to identify something they could share. To help nudge them along, we decided to offer a small incentive: \$300 worth of classroom supplies to teachers who turn their classroom into a Learning Lab.

Though modest, that incentive did the trick and we soon had eight teachers signed on.

Next Steps

We have now had Learning Labs in place for five months and we have seen clear benefits. These include:

- Participating teachers are implementing strategies they see in other classrooms. This is supported by research that showcases the power of peer-to-peer learning when it comes to actually changing teachers’ practices. Teachers themselves attribute this to seeing things in action in classrooms that look like theirs.

Their peers are working within the same teaching conditions, so adopting new strategies they see feels more doable.

- Teachers’ confidence in their own practice is growing. When teachers have a chance to visit other classrooms, they are more likely to realize that they are already doing shareable things. Especially for teachers who are working in Level 3 or 4 schools, where staff morale can be low, it’s important for these teachers to find bright spots in their school or even within their own classroom.
- Trust and collegiality is building within schools. We have seen that by opening doors in a more formal way, teachers are becoming even more likely to see each other as resources. We are thrilled that new connections across classrooms are being made, as we believe that this collegiality lifts the morale within an entire building.

Teachers who visited a Learning Lab classroom reported that the experience was invigorating, and it felt like the best way for them to collaborate and learn from their peers. They all reported that they had at least one new instructional strategy to take away.

For next year, we know that we want to expand Learning Labs into more schools and are also thinking about how we can use Learning Labs as a way to support proficient teachers in becoming exemplary. When we began the pilot, we chose *schools* first and then extended the opportunity to teachers within those schools. In our next iteration, we are hoping to switch our orientation to *teachers*; we want to attract strong teachers from across the district who can share their practices. We hope to have principals identify teachers who are on the higher end of proficient and encourage them to apply. By opening up their classrooms, these teachers will have an opportunity to model best instructional practices, helping to move them towards exemplary status.

Also, we also hope to extend the opportunity beyond regular classroom teachers to physical education teachers, special education teacher, and other specialists. Once we get a large number of Learning Labs established across our district, we will be able to build an online “catalog” of classrooms where teachers can go to observe a specific strength. This will be a great help to teachers and evaluators who are seeking specific resources to drive improvement and build instructional capacity.

We are happy to be expanding upon the great work we started this year. By broadening our thinking around teacher leadership, we are engaging more teachers and spreading the great work New Bedford teachers are already doing even further.