



EDUCATOR EFFECTIVENESS

Who We Are

As current teachers and school leaders from across Massachusetts, we came together through our participation in the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's 2014-2015 Teacher and Principal Advisory Cabinets to discuss and share our ideas about teacher leadership. Our opinions and advice are based on our collective experiences, which represent a wide range of school types and roles. We hope that the ideas in this document will catalyze conversations within your own school about its culture and readiness to embrace teacher leadership. After reading this report, please share it with your colleagues, possibly as a discussion piece at a staff meeting or as a shared reading for a team meeting or study group.

Building a School Culture that Supports Teacher Leadership

JULY 2015



MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF
ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY
EDUCATION

Advice from Teachers and Principals

A MESSAGE FROM THE Teacher and Principal Advisory Cabinets



When we think about teacher leadership, we see many clear benefits to students, teachers, and schools. Having a great teacher in every classroom is our collective goal and teacher leadership roles help us reach that goal in several ways. First, teacher leadership roles provide a needed platform for teachers to share what they are best at. This could include opening their doors to colleagues, serving as coaches or peer evaluators, sharing curriculum, or leading teacher teams. We believe that all teachers want to continuously improve and hone their practice, so when we build structures that allow teachers to learn from each other, all teachers can benefit.



Teacher leadership roles can be a lever for smart retention – offering teachers a way to expand their skills and take on new challenges that help them continue to grow professionally while remaining in the classroom. And, teacher leadership promotes a school climate built on collective responsibility for all students to succeed, where administrators and teachers work together to make decisions that are best for students.



Teacher leadership structures, however, are only as good as their implementation. Success depends on many “intangibles” – the types of things that policy briefs don’t usually address. We have focused on cultivating school cultures that support teacher leadership and help it flourish. This document is a compilation of our experiences and recommendations, and is intended for teachers and school leaders who share our passion for this important topic.

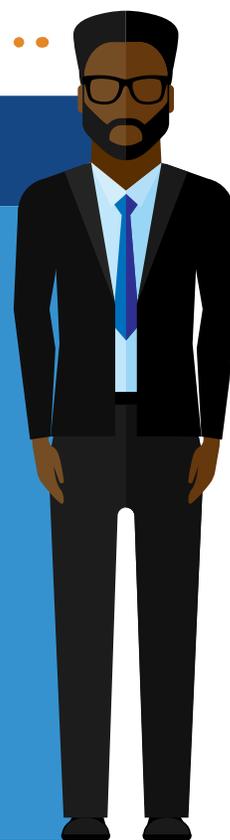
How do we define teacher leadership?

In reviewing various teacher leadership roles within our districts, we discovered that the list was very long and often unique to our specific contexts.

Teacher leadership can and should vary across contexts. To be most effective, it needs to be embedded in other systems and structures, versus being an add-on or “another thing.”

In our very open definition, teacher leadership roles generally offer a chance for teachers to work with adults outside of their classroom. An argument can also be made, however, that some teacher leaders are excellent teachers; we believe that is sufficient. Teacher leadership roles can be formal or informal, instructionally focused or policy-focused, school-based or district-based, and any other variation that suits the needs of the individual and the school/district.

JULY 2015



Part I: A School Culture that Supports Teacher Leadership

We spent some time thinking about the most important characteristics of a school culture in which teacher leadership flourishes. Here is what we came up with. We encourage teachers and principals to reflect on our ideas and use the questions to the right to discuss with colleagues.

Do you see these characteristics in your school?

How do you know they are there?

Are there other things you would add to this list?

Characteristic	What this looks like...
Collegial Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teachers collaborate regularly before, after, and during the school day, both formally and informally.• Staff is united by a shared vision. All teachers, administrators, and support staff can speak about the school's goals – what they are and how they are working towards them together.
Problem-Solving Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Staff needs to be more interested in <i>solving</i> problems than complaining about them.• Teachers see challenges as something that can be overcome – there is no such thing as a problem that is “impossible” to address.• Students are “ours,” as opposed to “yours/mine.” The students’ successes and challenges belong to everyone, and everyone is committed to making improvements.
Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teachers should feel comfortable when surfacing problems. Before people can rally around a solution, they often need to feel that their concerns have been heard. A trusting environment enables people to identify the real problem – an important step that allows everyone to quickly move on to the solution-seeking phase.• Teachers and principals have their doors open to welcome each other; there is no expectation to be perfect, so there is no fear of making oneself vulnerable. Everyone is focused on mutual growth and improvement.
Clear Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Everyone feels “in the loop” – there are no mixed messages; everyone is on the same page.• There is two-way communication between teachers and administrators.• There are clear, predictable, and reliable communication structures in place, such as weekly email updates or monthly staff meetings.

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QUESTIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR School Leaders

Do I know my teachers' individual talents and interests well? Is this true of the majority or only a small group?

- Send out a survey to gauge teachers' interests and talents in areas like data analysis, technology, education policy, public speaking, etc.
- For teachers who take on informal leadership roles, let them know that you notice and appreciate their "behind the scenes" work. Ask how you can support them.

What are the real non-negotiables?

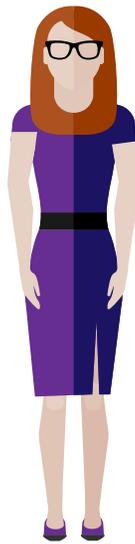
- Spend some time "scoping out" teacher leadership opportunities so you are clear on where and how teachers can have input.
- Share those non-negotiables with teachers so they understand the boundaries they're working within. It ensures that the experience is meaningful and the results are actionable.

Does "handing over the reins" make me feel like I am losing control?

- Reflect on why that is and work to identify a small starter project that avoids that feeling.
- It's OK to start small. Ask, "What can I let go of?"
- Think broadly when defining "teacher leadership" – many informal roles count just as much as formal ones when elevating teachers' voices and talents in a meaningful way.

How do teachers go about sharing ideas with me? When teachers raise a concern, am I comfortable listening or do I mentally prepare my response before they are finished?

- Think about how you can build more collaborative decision-making structures for teachers in which they can propose ideas and solutions.



Part II:

How School Leaders Can Pave the Way

School leaders are uniquely positioned to set the tone in a school building. We acknowledge, though, that no one person is solely responsible for a school's culture. Ideally, principals and teachers work together to build a positive workplace. Still, principals can take measures that open space for teacher leadership in their schools, as shown below.

What would you add?

- **Have a growth mindset about all staff:** Realize that each teacher in the building has unique skills and interests. Work to develop and use them to the school community's advantage. Give everyone the opportunity to lead.
- **Be humble and reflective:** The job of the principal is enormous; there is no way that one person could truly excel in everything. If you are aware of your own strengths and weaknesses, you will have a clearer roadmap of where you need support. Teacher leaders can be the perfect complement if you let them. The more open and honest principals are, the better the chances are that teachers will trust them.
- **Be a community-builder:** Prioritize culture and morale. Communicate clearly and consistently and with everyone – not just a select group. Ask questions and listen to the answers. Value collaboration and lead by example.
- **Be approachable and flexible:** Of course, school leaders will have certain non-negotiable items. Principals should be clear about the outcomes they are seeking, but be flexible about how teachers choose to get there. That will encourage teachers to really own their leadership initiatives. To build a culture of trust, principals can demonstrate that they are open to hearing alternative viewpoints. They can be clear that they are holding teachers accountable for presenting solutions, not just pointing out what is not working.
- **Step out of the comfort zone as a leader.** Use opportunities, like the start of a new school year or a staff meeting that is already on the calendar, to have an open and honest conversation. Use any opportunities to open lines of communications and illuminate the "non-discussibles," e.g., school culture, staff morale, and avenues for communication. Once principals step out of their comfort zone, teachers will follow the example.



Part III:

How Teachers Can Lead the Charge

It is essential that teachers see themselves as leaders, regardless of their current school culture and principal's or colleagues' openness to teacher leadership. We believe that there are always ways for teachers to step up and take on some form of leadership role.

You might already be working in a school with strong teacher leadership culture, in which case you can start working within that framework. If not, it's time to help develop a culture in which teacher leadership is possible. Here are some suggestions for overcoming common roadblocks. **What would you add?**

- **Take small steps to improve your school's culture:** Teacher leadership can be high profile or behind the scenes. It can be helpful for teachers to have "named" roles that they can fall back on if questioned by their peers, e.g., "I'm saying this in my capacity as a data coach." Opening your classroom doors to others, however, is an example of exhibiting leadership in a way that will move your school's culture to be more open and trusting. Any individual or small group can take that lead, regardless of principal buy-in. Similarly, by bringing together colleagues for training or peer study, you can make a positive difference. Trust takes time, but you have to start somewhere.
- **Encourage a reluctant principal:** Start small. Frank, candid conversations with your principal can reassure him or her that the idea of decision-making is a shared activity. His or her voice will still count. Approach the principal with a variety of solutions to problems; then ask for input. Think about starting with a project that is non-threatening and has a high chance of success, e.g., reach for the "low-hanging fruit."
- **Push through the fear of things not working out:** Realize that sometimes the outcomes will not be what you had in mind, but you can always learn from the journey. If teachers avoid leadership out of a fear of failure, they will never build the kind of environment where teacher leaders are actually empowered. Similarly, if you can model what it looks like to step outside your comfort zone, other teachers and your principal can follow your lead.
- **Don't wait to be empowered - you already are!** If you are a teacher, you can be a teacher leader. Think about your unique skills and passions. What is a problem at your school that you would like to solve? What are some small steps you can take to get you started? How have you already impacted your school beyond your classroom?
- **Don't burn yourself out:** It's critical to find allies in this work. We guarantee that there is at least one other person in your school who thinks like you do. Find that person and slowly build a coalition. You do not need to convert your most vocal opposition, but you do need to bring along others to make the work really flourish. Consider building a professional learning community (PLC) to support your work.



QUESTIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR Teachers

Am I a solution-seeker? Do I have a growth mindset?

- While there is always a place for thinking critically, pointing out all the things that are wrong in a situation does not actually make things any better.
- Ask questions to understand why things are the way they are; once you are better informed, you will be more empowered to propose ideas.

Am I more suited to a formal leadership role or an informal one?

- In what areas of my job do I excel? How can I bring my skills and talents outside of the classroom to benefit others?
- Teacher leadership can have many "looks." Find a way to lead that makes you feel comfortable.

How does my principal really feel about teacher leadership? And, how do I know?

- Have you ever talked about teacher leadership directly with other teachers and/or your school leader?
- If not, you may be holding incorrect assumptions. Start a conversation!

Where are the "bright spots" in our school? And how can I learn from things that are going well?

- Starting a conversation about school culture can seem daunting, but think about places where teachers are already successfully collaborating.
- Perhaps a particular team has had great success in visiting each other's classrooms or perhaps a particular coach is well-loved by teachers. What can you learn from these examples?

Interested in learning more about teacher leadership?
Visit www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/leadership/

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