

Building Trust

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CREATING AND SUSTAINING TEACHER LEADERSHIP ROLES

LESSONS LEARNED FROM DISTRICTS

During the 2014-2015 school year, ESE worked with a group of ten districts in a Professional Learning Network focused on teacher leadership. While the teacher leadership roles they were developing varied widely by context – depending on a district’s unique priorities and goals – we noticed that many districts faced the same challenges as they worked to implement new roles. Districts came across common roadblocks in their work and had to figure out how to get around them to ensure teacher leadership roles are professionally meaningful for the teachers, drive district priorities, and impact student learning.

This document is a compilation of “best advice” that we collected in the course of our year working together with these ten districts. We hope that the suggestions here will jumpstart your thinking about how to create and sustain meaningful teacher leadership roles. We are extremely grateful for the districts who candidly shared their challenges and are relentless in trying strategies to ensure these roles are meaningful for teachers, districts, and, most importantly, students. *A huge thanks to: Diman Regional Vocational Technical School District, Leicester Public Schools, Leominster Public Schools, New Bedford Public Schools, North Reading Public Schools, Northampton Public Schools, Old Rochester Regional School District, Revere Public Schools, Wakefield Public Schools, and Wareham Public Schools.*

As you embark on your work, please do make suggestions of other ways you have overcome challenges. We will update this list periodically. Send feedback or suggestions to EducatorDevelopment@doe.mass.edu.

Click on a tab above to read about various challenges and the corresponding suggestions.



BUILDING TRUST

We often heard that only *after* districts began to try implementing new teacher leadership roles did they realize that they needed to go back and spend time building trust amongst staff.

Here are some suggestions from districts about how to build trust from the beginning:

- Focus on communication: Ensure that there are structures in place that allow all teachers to access information about teacher leadership opportunities, such as a newsletter, blog, or weekly email.
- Consider doing a shared reading with district leaders and teachers, and even school committee members and other stakeholders. This can open up new avenues for conversation and communication with and across different groups.
- Make sure there is a two-way communication loop, so that teachers can ask questions and give feedback early on. For example, conduct surveys or focus groups to see what teachers, principals, and others think about a new role or program.
- Start small. For example, if your ultimate goal is to create a peer coaching role, you may need to start small with learning walks or allowing teachers to voluntarily open their classrooms to their peers.
- Create structures to help teacher leaders do their job. For example, teacher leaders might really benefit from a set of protocols they can use to run meetings, handle a difficult conversation, or conduct a peer observation.
- Be transparent as to who gets leadership roles and why. For example, create an application, let everyone know who is on the selection committee, and what the selection criteria are.
- Clearly delineate what teacher leaders will do, including specific responsibilities and how they may differ from other roles such as administrators.

District Spotlight: Diman Regional Vocational Technical High School

With new leadership and initiatives at Diman, things are fast moving and it's hard not to be simply swept up in trying to get it all done. However, we are working to slow down and make sensible decisions that we know will guide us in the right direction over the next several years. We have decided to implement new teacher leader roles in two phases: 1) Build up teachers' trust and faith that roles will be meaningful and 2) Reevaluate existing structures to see how they can be better aligned with our district goals.

To develop trust, teachers are now included on more district committees, including the Professional Development Committee and School Safety Committee. Minutes from these meetings and district administrator meetings are shared widely with staff to promote communication and transparency.

Our belief is that involving teachers more and showing how we are acting on their ideas will bring our teachers and administrators into closer alignment so that we are all working on the same goals and so that teachers feel more 'in the know' about where are as a district.

FUNDING

Many times, teacher leadership roles are not cost-neutral. This is because many districts want to be able to honor teachers' time and expertise with a stipend, honorarium, or percentage addition to their salaries.

Here are some ideas from districts about ways to fund teacher leadership roles:

- Use [Title II-A](#) funds: These are federal funds for the preparation, training, and recruitment of effective educators. Take a look at how your district uses these funds and think about opportunities to repurpose them to develop and support teacher leaders.
- Consider non-monetary rewards. Depending on the time commitment a teacher is making, a small, non-monetary reward might work. For example, specialized PD or training, release time, or a small amount of discretionary spending money to buy classroom supplies might go a long way.
- Exchange time serving in a leadership role for PD credits. Teachers who create and facilitate professional development courses for their peers could use the time they spend building courses towards their own PD requirements.
- Rather than filling a central office role, think about how you could spread the money earmarked for that salary across teacher leaders who can collectively assume the responsibilities of a central office employee.
- Team up with nearby districts to share costs of teacher leader training.
- Examine current teacher leadership roles and see if your teacher leaders are being used in a way that best aligns with your goals. Sometimes, re-imagining existing roles can lead to better use of teacher leaders' time and skills.
- Seek out other grant funds that could supplement your budget for teacher



“Teacher leadership is recognizing the expertise that teachers have and giving them the recognition and power to use that information the help the students, other teachers, administrators, and everyone in their schools.”

- Nate Malone, Teacher Leader, Leominster Public Schools

DEFINING ROLES

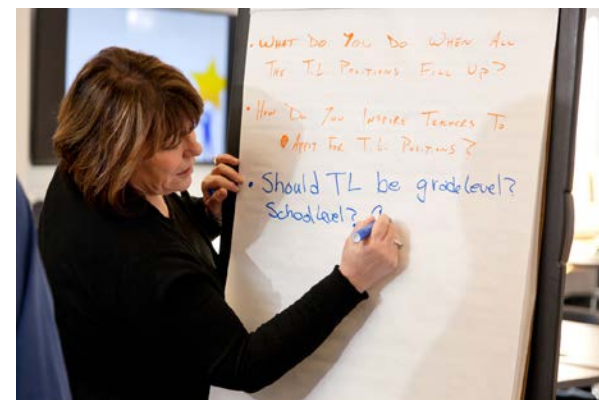
While it may be desirable to keep the overall concept of teacher leadership broadly defined, it can sometimes be helpful and necessary at the school and district level to have clear and specific job descriptions for teacher leaders that are unique to the district's or school's needs. This lets applicants know exactly what they are applying for, and it helps other teachers to understand what a teacher leader will (and will not) be doing. Clarity on the responsibilities can facilitate collective bargaining and increase the number of teachers interested in applying.

Here are some tips from districts to consider when defining teacher leadership roles:

- Make the role manageable. It is important to ensure that teacher leaders can maintain their focus on their primary role of teaching, without feeling burnt out.
- Balance the desire to standardize a role with the need to differentiate according to context.
- Be specific. Teachers want to understand the full scope of the role before they apply. To the extent that you can, share when the work will happen and how much time you think it will take.
- Include supports in the job description. Applicants will also want to know how they will be supported. This could be by convening all the teachers in that role a few times, inviting teachers to attend a PD or training, or perhaps through interactions with a district-level or school-level administrator who can help them problem-solve throughout the year. Supports are just as important as compensation in helping the role feel attractive and doable.
- Be clear on term of the position. If there is a lot of interest in the position and/or if the focus of the role may shift over time, it might make sense to build in flexibility and limits. For example, clearly stating a role is for a "one year term with the opportunity to continue for a second year."

District Spotlight: Leicester Public Schools

In Leicester, staff perceived the responsibilities of Teacher Leaders to be varied across schools. To understand the current day-to-day responsibilities of Teacher Leaders in different schools, we implemented a district-wide survey to hear directly from our staff. In asking about how they viewed the role of Teacher Leader, we learned that there was more consistency in Teacher Leader roles than was originally thought. Nearly all respondents viewed conducting grade level or content team meetings as a primary responsibility of Teacher Leaders. To support this clear responsibility, we provided training to enhance Teacher Leaders' ability to conduct effective meetings, equipping them with the tools necessary to be successful.



COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

In addition to building trust among teachers when implementing teacher leadership roles, trust and relationship building are critical components to collective bargaining agreements that support teacher leadership opportunities. Though relationships between labor and management vary by district, all of the districts talked about the importance of teacher leadership roles providing teachers with chances for growth without requiring they leave the classroom.

Here are some suggestions from districts on successfully bargaining roles:

- Seek out other districts that are implementing roles that are similar to the ones you envision for your district. Ask to see samples of their collective bargaining language or search in ESE's Teacher Contract Database, found at: <http://educatorcontracts.doemass.org/>.
- In collective bargaining language, leave teacher leadership descriptions open and flexible. This will allow for changes to be made to the roles based on feedback from teacher leaders and/or adjustments to district priorities that have implications for teacher leaders' job descriptions without having to renegotiate contract language each time.
- Include administrator, union leader, and teacher voices when developing teacher leadership roles. For example, union leaders and principals can collaborate to write the job descriptions, determine incentives, and select teacher leaders.

“The idea of teacher leadership is to cultivate opportunities for teachers while still keeping that foot well grounded in the classroom.”

- Patrick Daly, Assistant Superintendent, North Reading Public Schools



SELECTING LEADERS

Invest time in selecting the right teachers for specific teacher leadership positions. A rigorous selection process builds trust that the teacher leaders have the skills for the position and reduces time to train or replace less effective teacher leaders in the future.

Here are some strategies used by districts to select teacher leaders:

- Offer time for teachers to ask questions in person (or via email) about the application, rather than simply circulating written information.
- Create a selection panel that includes teachers and other staff with whom the selected teacher leaders will work.
- Build in a role play or small group scenario as part of the interview process to help see how prospective teacher leaders respond in the moment and interact with each other. This can be a good way to gauge how prospective teacher leaders give feedback, approach difficult conversations, facilitate a training, share a model lesson, etc. If time, include a debrief to gauge the prospective teacher leaders' reflectiveness.
- Don't select more teacher leaders than you have high-quality candidates. If you set out with high standards for who you select, it's better to stick with those high standards than to water them down to hit a numerical target. Other teachers need to see that the teachers who were chosen are the right ones. This will inspire more people to apply in the future.
- If you don't get the number you need on the first try, begin with a smaller number and then reopen applications mid-year. Often, teachers need to see what the role looks like in action before applying. Also, by mid-year, teachers have a better handle on their classrooms and might then be more open to taking on added responsibilities.
- If positions fill up quickly, think about another way to engage interested applicants so that they stay in the pipeline to fill future positions as they become available.



“Without teacher leaders you wouldn't have collaboration, you wouldn't have buy-in, and I don't think you would have retention of the good teachers.”

- Lisa Caponigro, Teacher Leader, Revere Public Schools

SUSTAINING AND SUPPORTING

It is important to pay attention to how you will sustain and support teacher leaders once they are in their roles. Teacher leadership roles should be a complement to ongoing work in teachers' classrooms and should not detract or distract from teaching duties. Therefore, it's important to make the roles manageable and help teachers feel successful and supported.

Here are some ideas from districts about how to support teacher leaders:

- If you want to know how to best support teacher leaders, ask them! Conduct periodic needs assessments/surveys to gauge teachers' needs and give them the leeway to self-direct their time to ensure that individuals' needs are being met.
- Leverage the expertise of teachers. Consider selecting important topics and conducting an "article study group" or connecting with another school or district to learn what they do around that topic.
- Recognize that leading peers may require a different skill set than leading students. Strong teachers may need support in non-instructional topics such as meeting facilitation, having difficult conversations, or providing feedback.
- Teacher leaders will want feedback on how they are doing in their role. Consider opportunities for them to work collaboratively and observe one another.
- Set up simple structures, like a whole group email list or shared online folder that will allow teacher leaders to ask questions and share resources within the group.
- Designate one central person in the district to oversee and manage teacher leaders. That way, they will have a person to turn to when they encounter challenges.

DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT: NORTH READING PUBLIC SCHOOLS

North Reading has always had a strong commitment to teacher leadership. As a result, we had many different roles that had been implemented over the years. But, we realized that we were not paying enough attention to the "soft skills" that teacher leaders need in order to be successful, regardless of their specific roles. We decided to run some trainings that would help all our teacher leaders develop skills related to successfully teaching adult learners.

The trainings focused on the principles of adult learning theory, strategies for building and monitoring trust in coaching relationships and teams, and increasing teachers' confidence and skills in leading conversations about improving practice.

The training was very well-received and feedback demonstrated that teachers learned actionable skills they can apply to their work as teacher leaders. One teacher pointed out the value of the training, saying "As teachers we are all certainly leaders in our own classroom, but I think that to be an effective teacher leader outside the classroom, one must have a range of specialized skills, including many that lie beyond those required for effective classroom teaching."