

STRENGTHENING THE SCHOOL'S

BACK

**Staff developers can help the go-to people
become more effective teacher leaders**

BY CHARLOTTE DANIELSON

After reading an article and talking with colleagues, Sally, a 2nd-grade teacher, became interested in the practice of “looping,” in which an individual teacher stays with a group of students for the first three years then “loops back” the fourth year to begin again with a new group. She convened a group of teachers in her school to examine the idea, and they all did some further reading and conferring with colleagues. After several meet-

ings, they were convinced of its merits and proposed to the principal that they try a version of this approach. The school implemented the group’s idea the next year.

Of course, while Sally’s role was critical, she did not act alone. Her colleagues contributed important revisions to the concept. Her principal, once convinced of the idea’s merits, ran important interference with the district office and, as the official voice of the school, explained the idea to

CHARLOTTE DANIELSON is an educational consultant. You can contact her at 448 Ewing St., Princeton, NJ 08540, (609) 683-0325, fax (609) 921-1240, e-mail: charlotte_danielson@hotmail.com.

parents of primary children.

The concept of teacher leadership hinges on the work of teachers such as Sally. What role do they play in their schools, and in their school’s improve-





pal. But as schools have become more complex and the expectations of schools more demanding, the concept of school principal as the sole individual in charge has had to give way. The bureaucratic and hierarchical structure of many schools has been replaced by a more egalitarian “distributed” form of leadership.

This movement has been underway for many years. Many schools have implemented some form of shared decision making or distributed leadership in which teachers are part of the school’s governance and/or assume formal leadership roles within a school, serving in such positions as department chairs or team leaders.

and rewarding their friends. Colleagues may come to regard the teachers who hold formal leadership positions as pseudo-administrators, “administrators in teachers’ clothing,” particularly if their role includes supervision and evaluation.

So while positions such as department chair represent an opportunity for teachers to experience leadership, they don’t fully capture the idea of individuals like Sally. Teacher leaders see themselves, first of all, as teachers. They are professional educators who want to continue to work as teachers rather than as managers. Teacher leaders are more than teachers, yet different from administrators.

True teacher leadership is exercised spontaneously and may be demonstrated by any teacher in the school. True teacher leadership is not conferred by role. It is not a permanent state; depending on their personal and professional situations, teachers may elect to exercise leadership one year but not another. Lastly, teacher leadership is fluid. Once a teacher has demonstrated skills, he or she establishes credibility with colleagues and is recognized as a go-to person to get things done. So while the teacher leader’s sphere of operating may change, the designation does not. Moreover, teacher leadership frequently evolves from teachers’ work in their own teaching. A teacher could develop an innovative approach in his or her own classroom and then discover that colleagues are interested in emulating it. Some highly innovative programs have started in exactly this way.

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Teacher leadership is an idea whose time has most definitely come. Such leadership can transform a school’s culture and its program offerings. But it does not arise by itself. The role of all administrators in setting the stage is critical. In particular,

ment efforts? How do their skills develop? What is their relationship to the more formal leadership structures within the school? Traditionally, “school leader” has meant the princi-

However, the concepts of shared decision making or distributed leadership are of limited value. They suggest that someone — typically an administrator — is “sharing” the decision making or “distributing” the leadership. This implies that decisions and leadership are the administrator’s to share, and these approaches, therefore, are an extension of administrative leadership. Thus, while a collaborative decision-making structure, and the teacher empowerment that accompanies it, is critical to school improvement efforts, the concept of teacher leadership envisioned in this article results from a less formal, more organic demonstration of initiative on the part of teachers.

In addition, such organizational structures may be subject to the criticism of “appoint and anoint,” in which principals or central office staff are seen as demonstrating favoritism

in understanding it and its practice, the role of staff developers is critical.

Administrators (including staff developers) support the development of teacher leadership in many ways. First, they establish and maintain a professional culture of inquiry and a focus on student learning. They insist that teachers examine data and evidence and make instructional adjustments accordingly. But with respect to teacher leaders, they play an additional role. They:

- **Convey confidence in teachers.**

Teachers unaccustomed to taking initiative and exercising leadership may not believe that their ideas will be valued. They may not even be sure their ideas have merit. Administrators are in a position to send important signals to teachers that their ideas are important and that the teachers play a critical role in improving the school's program. These signals are sent in many ways. Among the most effective are the informal ones, in which principals publicly recognize a teacher's idea and invite others to explore it.

- **Clarify ideas and plan an approach.**

A teacher may approach the administrator with the germ of an idea, a recognized opportunity to improve the school's program. But the idea may not be fully developed. It may conflict or be redundant with another initiative of which the teacher is unaware. The principal has an important responsibility to help the teacher leader hone the concept and develop a plan of action that is likely to succeed.

- **Marshal support from "downtown."**

Some initiatives can be implemented solely within a school; some need to be condoned by others in the district organization. Principals play an important role as advocates for projects initiated by educators in their school, to ensure that the projects are understood and supported by the

Teacher leadership: It's still being invented

The concept of teacher leadership is elusive and has not yet been fully captured in research literature. In the educational environment, the term "school leader" means administrative leadership; university programs in leadership focus on the roles of site and district office administrators. Not only has teacher leadership not been well-defined, the relationship between teacher leadership and administrative leadership has not been fully illuminated.

There is nothing in the concept of teacher leadership that conflicts with the important (indeed essential) role of administrative leadership. Site administrators are, after all, the people in charge of the building; they are the managers and see to it that operations run smoothly. But they also do much more: They set the tone, they maintain the focus on student learning, they create a culture of professional inquiry and an expectation that all teachers will be involved in ongoing improvement of the school's program. They are,

along with being managers, the instructional leaders of their schools. In addition, they are the voice of the school to the outside world — to the parents, the wider community, and the other schools in the district.

The concept of teacher leadership also recognizes that teachers' tenure in a school is normally longer than that of the administrators who are nominally in charge (20 to 30 years for many teachers, as compared with the typical three to five years for a principal).

The school change and leadership literature is replete with examples of schools that have been turned around by an inspired, and inspiring, principal, but which revert to their previous state when that individual moves to another position. Therefore, cultivating teacher leadership may well be a wise investment for a school district committed to improving practice long term. It may also prove decisive in encouraging gifted educators to remain with teaching rather than abandon the profession for one that offers greater opportunities for ongoing challenge and advancement.

larger administrative team. When financial resources are involved, this advocacy is essential.

- **Locate additional resources.**

Administrators are typically connected with district and other external resources that can support an initiative. Teacher leaders might make a presentation to a business or parent group. But administrators frequently have access to additional support networks.

- **Represent innovation to the public.**

Lastly, any new practice must be understood and valued by the public,

particularly by the parents of students involved. Insofar as the principal is the official voice of the school, it is important that the message emanate from the principal's office. Teacher leaders may be involved in this effort, but it cannot happen without the principal.

As administrators, staff development leaders support teachers in the ways described. The precise division of labor between staff developers (frequently from the central office) and site administrators depends on the district's structure and existing interpersonal relationships.

But in addition, staff developers have a particular role. The work of teacher leaders involves recognizing an opportunity, convincing others of a vision, taking initiative, marshaling resources, sustaining others' commitment, and more. These skills are not included in most teacher preparation programs. Staff developers promote skill development in the following areas:

- **Collaboration.**

In many schools, teachers work alone and are not skilled at the give-and-take required for collective effort. Even when the culture values the de-privatization of practice (a major undertaking in itself), teachers themselves may not have mastered the skills of active listening, valuing others' ideas, synthesizing, etc. Staff developers need to model these skills and to conduct training particularly designed to develop collaboration skills. Many teachers use these skills in their teaching, but not at a conscious level. Focusing on helping teachers develop and use these skills helps them move into new roles with their colleagues.

- **Planning.**

Skilled teacher leadership requires that teachers acquire the ability to take an idea, recognize its component parts, and plan for each. The specifics of the plan will vary with the project, but even a simple-sounding effort to establish a study group requires determining the resources needed and developing a plan. Staff developers need to work with teachers formally to develop their abilities to plan, to identify resources needed, and to recognize which events need to happen before others can be undertaken.

- **Communication.**

All teachers communicate with their students and families. But the communication required of teacher leaders goes beyond that, to include creating a vision, persuading colleagues and possibly individuals out-

side the school, and keeping others informed of progress. Staff developers can support teacher leaders by helping them hone their message and prepare a presentation for colleagues or those outside the school. This work may involve articulating the situation the plan is intended to address; it might entail offering options; or it might require "painting a picture" of the outcome.

- **Group process.**

Beyond the norms of collaboration, specific skills are involved in managing a group working together. Norms must be established so the environment is safe, and the leader must know when it is time to consolidate a discussion and move to action. Such facilitation skills, while similar to those used with students, are done differently with colleagues. Staff developers can impart facilitation skills to teacher leaders by discussing the dynamics of a situation, helping a teacher plan an approach, and sitting in on meetings and offering feedback to teachers on the dynamics they observed.

SUMMARY

Every school and school district is stronger if and when it cultivates teachers as leaders; teacher leaders form the backbone of a school. They are go-to people; they understand the workings of the institution and how to make things happen, yet they may not be the individuals in formal leadership positions.

Teacher leaders also are experts in the subjects they teach, stay current with the latest research on how to teach them, and engage their colleagues in discussions about practice. They take on projects, seeing opportunities to improve the school and its programs, particularly for those students most in need of support. They are, in short, leaders, and make incalculable contributions to the lives of the schools fortunate to have them. ■