



2015



# **BUILDING BRIDGES**

Connecting Teacher Leadership and Student Success



We advance teachers' leadership skills and opportunities, building a national movement to ensure all students have the opportunity to succeed in school and life.

Leading Educators partners with schools and districts to maximize the leadership development of highly effective teachers. Our goal is to bolster the talent pipeline via identifying and training strong potential teacher leaders and, in turn, increase student achievement and develop the skills and sustainability of teachers on our teacher leaders' teams. For more information, visit [www.leadingeducators.org](http://www.leadingeducators.org).

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# **Building Bridges**

## Connecting Teacher Leadership and Student Success

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## Introduction

How do some teacher leaders manage to transform outcomes for students while others struggle? Is it a matter of skill or do certain school conditions increase the likelihood of success? What characteristics define the priorities of the most effective teacher leaders? How much release time do teacher leaders need to be successful? How do we design more teacher leadership that drives school performance?

When administrators and teachers share leadership, teachers' working relationships are stronger,<sup>1</sup> student achievement is higher,<sup>2</sup> and highly effective teachers can be retained in the schools that need them.<sup>3</sup> Highly effective teachers can have substantial spillover effects on their peers' performance.<sup>4</sup> With such promise, teacher leadership is gaining traction as a solution for some of the most persistent and pervasive problems in America's schools.<sup>5</sup> Despite this focus and attention, the specific practices of effective teacher leadership remain "direly sought and rarely found."<sup>6</sup> As schools experiment with new structures, they can find themselves falling short of desired results. To achieve the potential of teacher leadership, schools need a bridge to cross the gap between teacher leadership and student success.

Since 2008, Leading Educators has partnered with schools and districts to develop over 900 teacher leaders across the country. In "Leading from the Front of the Classroom," Leading Educators and the Aspen Institute outlined a roadmap for systems to build transformative teacher leadership.<sup>7</sup> In this paper, we focus on specific paths for effective teacher leader role design. We collected lessons learned from teacher leaders, their leadership coaches, and their principals through a series of focus groups, interviews, and surveys.<sup>8</sup> Through their experiences, we sought to understand the characteristics of teacher leaders who were successful in driving improvements in teacher practice and student learning. We distill conditions that increase the likelihood of success to help schools build bridges over common obstacles.

In our research, three types of bridges closed the gap between teacher leadership and student success. First, we found teacher leaders achieved greater impact on student learning when they developed priorities aligned with school priorities and set clear, measurable, goals. The second bridge required teacher leaders to identify a clear, cohesive team to support. Finally, successful teacher leaders had carefully planned and agreed upon schedules with their administration. This ensured they had the time and opportunity to perform their leadership responsibilities. When teacher leaders had these bridges in place, they were able to drive success for the teachers and students they served. In this paper, we outline our learning in each of these three categories to support schools and districts in building these bridges. When schools and districts plan for these three key areas, they can chart a path for transformative teacher leadership.

## Defining priorities and setting goals

| How Schools Built Bridges  | Common Missteps   |
|--|---|
| Teacher leaders and principals defined clear goals and measures for success for the role.                                    | Teacher leaders did not identify metrics for success, or identified goals that did not meaningfully track progress. |
| Teacher leaders and principals aligned individual goals with school goals.   | Teacher leaders defined priorities in isolation.  |
| Teacher leaders accurately aligned priorities to the individual needs of the teachers they supported using a needs analysis. | Teacher leader priorities were aligned only to the interests or strengths of the teacher leader.                    |
| Teacher leaders defined the time to be spent on logistics and leadership to build staff capacity in instruction and culture. | Teacher leaders did not anticipate the heavy transactional costs involved in their role.                            |

Across interviews, surveys, and focus groups, teacher leaders and their leadership coaches emphasized the bridge-building potential of setting the right priorities and goals. In every focus group, participants identified goal setting as the highest-leverage teacher leader behavior. In particular, teacher leaders in 80% of focus groups spoke of the need to align individual goals with school goals by working closely with a school leader. When the priorities held by a system, school, and teacher leader are not in alignment, it can be a major barrier to teacher leader success.<sup>9</sup> But when a teacher leader works with administration to define these priorities, the talents, expertise, and interests of the teacher leader can be connected with a school-wide improvement plan, empowering the teacher leader to drive real change. Teacher leaders had an easier path to find the time, resources, and support to achieve their goals with students. Additionally, when teacher leaders and principals defined measures to analyze their progress towards student goals, they were able to build and maintain momentum for their work. In schools where collaborative goal-setting was a priority, clear benchmarks helped principals and teacher leaders track progress and make adjustments as needed.

Teacher leaders, leadership coaches, and principals also discussed the importance of aligning and adjusting the support they would provide based on the evolving needs of their teachers. In particular, data leaders found it

### SCHOOL CULTURE ROLES

Defining clear priorities, goals, and metrics was especially important for teacher leaders focused on driving improvements in school culture. Leadership coaches reported that successful school culture leaders were responsible for implementing a program or approach the school had adopted. This gave their role focus, a base of resources, and clear metrics for success. Without this, school leaders struggled to know whether a school culture role was worth continued investment. For example, one teacher leader's role focused on CHAMPS, an evidence-based classroom management approach. She defined a checklist of routines and procedures to put in place in each classroom, and conducted walkthroughs to measure the success rate of classrooms implementing these strategies.

important to accurately assess teachers' skill levels and needs around data. For example, one teacher leader began the year by asking each of her teachers to analyze data and identify trends. She assessed each teacher's skill level, and used her learnings to scaffold strategies to meet differing individual needs and expand teachers' capacity with data. By expanding teachers' capacity to use data to drive their instruction, they could make real improvements to student learning.

In several focus groups, participants highlighted flexibility to adjust to shifting priorities as a key attribute of effective teacher leaders. But, this flexibility should come with limits; teacher leaders who spent too much of their time responding to urgent priorities found themselves struggling through endless roadblocks with little time to devote to their intended goals. This was particularly problematic for teacher leaders who focused on building and training staff in a program for blended learning, which combines traditional classroom instruction with computer-mediated activities. Teacher leaders in blended learning roles sometimes found themselves consistently troubleshooting technological problems, rather than supporting teachers in mastering the use of blended learning strategies to improve their instructional practice. Successful teacher leaders in these roles defined and defended the balance of time spent on the logistics of blended learning (setting up and troubleshooting technology) versus capacity building (improving instructional practice) at the start. This enabled them to stay aligned to the goals and original purpose of their role, while adjusting to meet emerging needs.

#### TEACHER LEADER SPOTLIGHT

Jarvis Lundy, a teacher leader at ReNEW Schaumburg Elementary in New Orleans, describes how this might look in practice. In the 2013-2014 school year, he led an initiative to develop a response-to-intervention program to accelerate learning for the lowest performing 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> graders. His goal was for these students to achieve 1.5 years growth on the Northwest Evaluation Association's Measures of Academic Progress. Jarvis developed a team of interventionists, half of whom were first year teachers. To develop their content knowledge and skills at classroom management with a small group of students, he led weekly data and problem solving meetings and conducted biweekly observations and feedback. By defining a clear goal, aligning his support to his teachers' needs, and clearly defining the scope of his responsibilities, Jarvis was able to establish lasting response-to-intervention structures at his school. By the end of the year, the average growth for students in the program was 1.3 years. Reflecting on his project, Jarvis said "the development of my intervention team [directly led to] the academic success of students...by coaching and meeting with the team weekly, they quickly improved as instructors."

## Determining sphere of influence

| How Schools Built Bridges  | Common Missteps  |
|--|--|
| Teacher leaders and principals defined a clear, cohesive team for teacher leaders to support.                                | The teacher leader's team was unclear, lacked cohesion, or was not identified.   |
| Teacher leaders and principals identified a manageable caseload of approximately two to five individuals per teacher leader. | The caseload was too small to drive much change or too large for intensive support.  |
| Teacher leaders and principals aligned the caseload with school-wide plan for professional development for the year.         | Teacher leaders and principals did not align caseloads with school-wide plans, resulting in teachers receiving feedback from multiple sources or on multiple topics. |

Clarifying the scope of a teacher leader's influence and responsibility prevents many roadblocks. While this may seem to be a simple step, it may be one of the most common impediments to teacher leadership that drives student achievement. On a recent survey conducted by Leading Educators, only 8% of teacher leaders and principals identified the same sphere of influence when asked to identify the teacher leader's responsibilities. Without a common understanding of the teacher leader's sphere of influence, teacher leaders struggle to find the authority and support to implement real changes that can improve instruction.

In our interviews and focus groups, teacher leaders who made concrete changes in teacher practice and student learning had a clearly-defined team. While some teacher leaders were successful with larger teams, we found the caseload across all roles that enabled teacher leaders to do their best work consisted of approximately two to five individuals. In traditional grade level or department chair roles, this might be a department or grade level. In other cases, this was another subset of teachers, such as first year teachers or teachers interested in receiving coaching support. Some teacher leaders selected an initial coalition to test out and build school-wide support for their initiatives. The grade level leaders and department chairs often found their built-in, clearly-defined teams to be a clear advantage in rolling out and securing investment for new, expanded leadership roles. For other, less traditional teacher leader roles, this sphere of influence had to be defined. The teacher leader and principal needed to carefully plan how and when the role would be communicated to increase investment.

Schools further strengthened this bridge-building strategy by aligning the teacher leader's role with the school's plan for professional learning for the year. When identifying the educators the teacher leader would support, successful schools considered all the other development for those educators. This prevented teachers from receiving contradictory feedback from multiple sources.<sup>10</sup> For example, a special education teacher focused on literacy found her work at odds with a Common Core coach. This made it difficult for the teachers supported to improve instruction. When teacher leaders and principals instead aligned support within a school-wide plan, their collective efforts could strengthen and support real improvements in teaching and learning, making the most of limited school resources.



## Scheduling release time

| How Schools Built Bridges  | Common Missteps  |
|--|--|
| Teacher leaders and principals set realistic expectations for release time needed to carry out key responsibilities.                                       | Teacher leaders and principals identified responsibilities without corresponding release time. |
| Schools scheduled release time to overlap with opportunities to observe instruction, meet with, or coach team members.                                     | Schools finalized the schedule before identifying teachers receiving coaching support.         |
| Schools protected release time with creative scheduling approaches (such as co-teaching or blended learning models) or by planning for qualified coverage. | Schools scheduled over or deprioritized release time.  |

A simple but common roadblock is finding time to lead adults with a full teaching load. Given limited budgets and changing realities, many schools struggled with scheduling and maintaining release time. In 2014, only 32% of teacher leaders surveyed by Leading Educators reported that they had enough release time to perform their leadership responsibilities.<sup>11</sup> This has direct impact on teacher leaders' ability to improve the teaching practice of their peers, and accordingly, drive student learning. For example, while the majority of focus group participants cited consistent observation and feedback as one of the highest leverage teacher leader behaviors, surveyed teacher leaders reported spending only 8% of their time observing instruction and providing feedback.

Successful teacher leaders had release time that matched their leadership responsibilities.<sup>12</sup> Their schools began the year by weighing additional responsibilities of each teacher leader and assessing the time required for these responsibilities. Calculating appropriate release time allowed school leaders and teacher leaders to norm on expectations at the start of the year. The following are sample guidelines that schools have used to calculate release time for various teacher leadership roles.

- For each person coached, teacher leaders added 30 minutes for observation, 45 minutes for debrief and 1 hour prep time. For weekly coaching, they planned for 9 hours of release time per month per coachee.<sup>13</sup>
- For leading Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), teacher leaders added 1 hour per week to lead the meeting, 1 hour per week to prepare, and two hours per month to gather and analyze data. To lead a weekly PLC, they planned for 10 hours of release time per month.<sup>14</sup>
- To implement a new program, curriculum, or approach, teacher leaders planned for 3 hours per month to plan professional development, 1 hour per month to lead the professional development, 2 hours to collect data on the success of the initiative, and 3 hours to provide one-on-one support to struggling individuals. In total, they planned for 9 hours of release time per month.<sup>15</sup>

**SAMPLE SCHEDULE FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS LEAD**

|                | Period 1                  | Period 2                  | Period 3                  | Period 4      | Period 5                  | Period 6                  |
|----------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Teacher 1      | 6 <sup>th</sup> grade ELA | 6 <sup>th</sup> grade ELA | Planning                  | Dept. Meeting | 6 <sup>th</sup> grade ELA | 6 <sup>th</sup> grade ELA |
| Teacher 2      | Planning                  | 7 <sup>th</sup> grade ELA | 7 <sup>th</sup> grade ELA | Dept. Meeting | 7 <sup>th</sup> grade ELA | 7 <sup>th</sup> grade ELA |
| Teacher 3      | 8 <sup>th</sup> grade ELA | Intervention              | Planning                  | Dept. Meeting | Intervention              | 8 <sup>th</sup> grade ELA |
| Teacher Leader | Observations and Coaching | 8 <sup>th</sup> grade ELA | Observations and Coaching | Dept. Meeting | Planning                  | 8 <sup>th</sup> grade ELA |

When budgetary and scheduling constraints interrupted the planned release time for teacher leaders’ planned responsibilities, successful teacher leaders built bridges by rethinking their support strategies. For example, when one teacher leader’s lack of release time prevented her from coaching as often as planned, she created peer feedback structures to ensure teachers continually improved instruction in priority areas. Similarly, other teacher leaders have accessed administrators and other staff to conduct observations aligned with the teacher leader’s initiative.

While the quantity of release time played an important role in teacher leaders’ success, the alignment of the release time to responsibilities was equally important. This alignment ensured teacher leaders did not find themselves searching for coverage for their classes each time they carried out instructional supports such as observation and feedback. Careful scheduling was particularly important for the department chairs and other content-focused teacher leaders who led vertical teams across many grade levels. Schools with successful content-focused teacher leaders staggered teacher leader release time while others teachers delivered instruction so that observations could occur. In contrast, successful grade level leaders benefited from common, rather than staggered, planning time with their team. These considerations required careful scheduling and planning at the beginning of the year.

Depending on school level and funding availability, successful schools used a variety of strategies to create release time for teacher leaders. In general, successful schools were committed to protecting release time and did so by creative scheduling or by hiring additional staff.<sup>16</sup> With schools that hired additional staff, middle and high schools found an easier path, as schedules lend themselves well for teacher leaders to simply be assigned less than the full load of classes.

Even with funding, scheduling release time could be a challenge at the elementary level. Elementary teacher leaders needed to trust the expertise of those sharing responsibility for their students’ learning. They struggled when teachers providing release time lacked experience working with a certain age group or population, had been unsuccessful in the past, or were not screened with the same rigor as other staff. For example, one school struggled utilizing a fifth grade teacher to provide coverage for early childhood. Another school repurposed a low-

performing novice teacher to provide coverage for teacher leaders. This made it difficult for teacher leaders to use their release time as intended as they often found themselves providing additional support or were reluctant to leave their own classrooms. To address these issues at the elementary level, one school narrowed the focus of teachers offering release time so that they could do a few things well. For example, release time teachers provided small group instruction in guided reading but did not lead whole class literacy instruction.

#### TEACHER LEADER SPOTLIGHT

By leveraging funding from the U.S. Department of Education’s Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant, DC Public Schools in Washington, D.C. places additional personnel on the budgets of Teacher Leadership Innovation (TLI) schools to create flexibility in school schedules. This allows TLI schools to set aside time during the day for teacher leaders to dedicate to leadership work. Ketcham Elementary School has developed a strong model for creating release time through this program. Camille Townsend, a fifth grade teacher and RTI coach, leads a school-wide close reading initiative. The school leveraged TLI funding to hire a full-time fifth grade teacher to provide release time for two fifth grade teacher leaders. The release time is also scheduled to ensure Camille has opportunities to both observe and model close reading for staff. While her work is still in progress, her leadership coach reports she has been able to continually improve her strategies and develop the capacity of her teachers to drive student learning.

## Conclusion

Effective teacher leadership has potential to be much more than a “feel-good factor.”<sup>17</sup> With effective training, teacher leaders have the potential to foster the growth of professional learning climates, increase principal and teacher self-efficacy, and retain highly-talented individuals in high-poverty schools.<sup>18</sup> These changes would be transformative for student learning.<sup>19</sup>

But even the most capable, talented teacher leaders can find themselves far from this potential if the roadmap for their role encounters roadblock after roadblock. Conditions put in place by role design make the difference between teacher leadership that creates change and teacher leadership that falls short. Luckily, the hard work of teacher leader pioneers has begun to identify the characteristics that build bridges. Optimal strategies for setting priorities, identifying sphere of influence, and planning release time are emerging. To design teacher leadership that drives school performance, principals and teacher leaders must build bridges over these common roadblocks. As the number of schools experimenting with new teacher leadership grows, these strategies will bridge the gap between teacher leadership and student success.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Karen Seashore Louis, Kenneth Leithwood, Kyla L. Wahlstrom, and Stephen E. Anderson, "Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning," *University of Minnesota* (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson, "Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning"

<sup>3</sup> Leading Educators and the Aspen Institute, "Teacher Leadership that Works," *Aspen Institute* (2014).

<sup>4</sup> C. Kirabo Jackson and Elias Bruegmann, "Teaching students and teaching each other: The importance of peer learning for teachers," *National Bureau of Economic Research* No. 15202 (2009); Cory Koedel, "An empirical analysis of teacher spillover effects in secondary school," *Economics of Education Review*, Vol. 28, 682–692 (2009); Kun Yuan, "A value-added study of teacher spillover effects across four core subjects in middle schools," *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, Vol. 23, no 7 (2015).

<sup>5</sup> Jill Harrison Berg, Christina A. Borsch, and Phomdaen Souvanna, "Critical Conditions: What Teacher Leaders Need to be Effective in Schools," *Journal of Staff Development*, Vol. 34, no. 2 (2013); Frank Crowther, "Review of Teacher Leadership: the 'New' Foundations of Teacher Education," *Teaching Education*, Vol. 23 no 1 (2012): 109-110; Rachel Curtis, "Finding a New Way: Leveraging Teacher Leadership to Meet Unprecedented Demands," *The Aspen Institute* (February 2013); Alma Harris, "Teacher Leadership: More Than Just a Feel-Good Factor?" *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, Vol. 4 no. 3 (September 2005): 205-6; Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrison, *Taking the Lead: New Roles for Teachers and School-based Coaches*, National Staff Development Council (2006); Ann Lieberman, "Laureates Speak: Can Teachers Really Be Leaders?" *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, Vol. 47, Supplement 1 (Fall 2011): 16-18; Melinda M. Mangin and Sara Ray Stoelinga, "Special Issue: Instructional Teacher Leadership in Action," *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, Vol. 13 no. 2 (June 2010): 1-4; Kathryn Singh, "Teacher Leadership: Making Your Voice Count," *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, Vol. 47, Supplement 1 (Fall 2011): 6-10; Sara Ray Stoelinga and Melinda M. Mangin, "Examining Effective Teacher Leadership: A Case Study Approach," *Harvard Education Review*, Vol. 80, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 430-432; Jennifer York-Barr and Karen Duke, "What Do We Know About Teacher Leadership? Findings from Two Decades of Scholarship," *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 74, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 287-8.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Gonzales and Linda Lambert, "Teacher Leadership in Professional Development Schools: Emerging Conceptions, Identities, and Practices," *Journal of School Leadership*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2014).

<sup>7</sup> Leading Educators and the Aspen Institute, "Teacher Leadership that Works."

<sup>8</sup> Focus groups were held in November 2014–January 2015. Teacher leaders were selected based on demonstrated results raising student achievement. Participants included alumni of Leading Educators Fellowship in Kansas City and New Orleans, currently enrolled Fellows or Teacher Leader Innovation (TLI) teacher leaders in New Orleans and Washington D.C., and teacher leaders not affiliated with Leading Educators in Chicago and New Orleans. In that same time period, we conducted one-on-one interviews with TLI leadership coaches. Survey data cited came from Leading Educators annual Principal, Alumni, and teacher leader surveys. There were 44 principal responses, 36 alumni, and 145 teacher leader responses recorded.

<sup>9</sup> York-Barr and Duke, "What Do We Know About Teacher Leadership? Findings from Two Decades of Scholarship," 269-270.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony S. Bryk, Louis M. Gomez, Alicia Grunow, and Paul G. LeMahieu, *Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better*, Harvard Education Press (2015):28-30.

<sup>11</sup> A survey of 12 teacher leaders participating in Leading Educators Fellowship program in Washington, D.C., New Orleans, and Kansas City.

<sup>12</sup> Roland G. Fryer, "Financial Incentives and Student Achievement: Evidence from Randomized Trials." *NBER* No. 15898.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Bambrick-Santoyo, Doug Lemov, and B. Peiser, *Leverage Leadership: A Practical Guide to Building Exceptional Schools*, Jossey-Bass (2012).

<sup>14</sup> Katherine Parker Boudett & Elizabeth City, *Meeting Wise: Making the Most of Collaborative Time for Educators*. Harvard Education Press (2014).

<sup>15</sup> John Kotter, *Leading Change*, The Harvard Business Press (1996); Partners in School Innovation (2011): Results Oriented Leadership.

<sup>16</sup> Public Impact (2012-2015), *Tools for School Design Teams*, <http://opportunityculture.org/reach/tools-for-school-design-teams/#School-Models>

<sup>17</sup> Harris, "Teacher Leadership: More Than Just a Feel-Good Factor?"

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<sup>18</sup> Stoelinga and Mangin, "Examining Effective Teacher Leadership: A Case Study Approach," *Harvard Education Review*, Vol. 80, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 430-432; York-Barr and Duke, "What Do We Know About Teacher Leadership? Findings from Two Decades of Scholarship," 287-8.

<sup>19</sup> Karen Seashore Louis, Kenneth Leithwood, Kyla L. Wahlstrom, and Stephen E. Anderson (2010) "Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning", University of Minnesota; TNTP, "Greenhouse Schools: How Schools Can Build Cultures Where Teachers and Students Thrive," (2012).



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