Excellent Teachers Leading the Way: How To Cultivate Teacher Leadership

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Policy changes and mandates that may be at odds with middle school philosophy continue to come from state legislatures and departments of education. Increased emphasis on content coverage and test scores can be an obstacle to many middle level practices, such as curriculum integration and differentiated instruction. As this situation continues, it becomes increasingly difficult for middle grades educators to meet students' needs as individual learners, to develop their voices and ownership in learning, and to explore students' questions and concerns about the world around them (Kohn, 2000).

While an increasing number of well-prepared, exemplary middle grades educators know and understand this situation, these educators are often not the ones leading school change. Teachers are at the center of all reform movements, and without their full participation and leadership, any effort to reform education is doomed to failure. Real change cannot be mandated, even by well-intentioned policymakers (Lieberman & Miller, 1999). Given this, why is it that teachers are not taking the lead in current reform, and how can they best be supported as leaders of school improvement? A grassroots movement by teachers reinforcing the notion that "every teacher is a leader" may be vital to the continued success of middle level schools in this challenging time.

Benefits of teacher leadership

Middle schools benefit in numerous ways by increasing opportunities for teacher leadership. Teacher leaders serve as mentors and encourage their peers; they influence policies in their schools; they assist in improving instructional practice; and they help develop the leadership capacity and improve retention of other teachers (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). As these teacher leaders work to help others develop skills and practices, they frequently hone their own teaching skills and improve their classroom performance (Ovando, 1994). The ultimate benefit is improved practice and increased student performance for all (Katzenmeyer & Moller). Higher student achievement, even as defined by traditional measures, increases in schools with strong teacher leaders (Lambert, 2003). Teacher leadership allows excellent teachers to impact their colleagues and the students in their classrooms, and this serves as an incentive for them to remain in the classroom. Given

This article reflects the following *This We Believe* **characteristics:** Committed Leaders — Courageous & Collaborative Leaders — Professional Development

Figure 1 Action research project settings and populations

School Size/ Number of Students		Grade Configuration		Student Achievement		Economically Disadvantaged Students		Minority Student Population	
0–249	2%	P–8	11%	Exceeded school goal by 10%	32%	0–24%	9%	0–24%	66%
250–499	27%	7–8	11%	Met school goal	52%	25–49%	41%	25–49%	27%
500–749	48%	6–8	78%	Did not meet school goal	16%	50–74%	45%	50–74%	5%
750–1000	23%					75–100%	5%	75–100%	2%

these benefits, it may be worth asking, *What is the current status of teacher leadership?* and *How we can we cultivate it in our middle level schools?* In the spirit of teacher leadership, let us ask teachers to answer these questions.

Are teacher leaders in our schools?

Teachers enrolled in graduate programs that included a focus on action research and teacher leadership designed and implemented studies within their home schools. These teacher researchers used action research projects to examine teacher leadership in 44 middle level schools in 13 counties. All were rural or small community schools, identifying themselves as middle schools or middle schools within a K–8 setting. Most schools housed grades 6–8, with others housing grades 7–8 or K–8. All included elements of middle school organization such as teaching teams, common planning time, a verbalized commitment to teachers who are knowledgeable about young adolescents, and some implementation of integrated curriculum and exploratory classes. They included a range of educators in terms of experience, typically predominantly female, with 10%–15% males. Both male and female principals were included in the study, and the gender of the principal did not correlate with any findings. The schools ranged in size from 160 to 908 students, with the majority falling within the 500–749 range. The schools varied in terms of students' ethnic diversity, with the majority serving less than 25% students of color. Half of the schools identified more than 50% of students as economically disadvantaged. In terms of student achievement test scores, the majority of the study schools

were identified as meeting expected state growth goals (Figure 1).

The teacher researchers gathered data from multiple sources, including school mission statements, school and district policy documents, school improvement plans, and student achievement data. They also distributed surveys to all building teachers and administrators, with an average return rate of 35%. They conducted

Teacher leaders help develop the leadership capacity of other teachers.
photo by Alan Geho

follow-up interviews with a subgroup of five to ten survey respondents.

All of the data were analyzed using two frameworks. The first was a "leading structural change" schema (Knoster, 1991) which focused on elements necessary to sustain change (Figure 2). The second was Lambert's (2003, p. 5) teacher leadership capacity matrix. Lambert described a school's capacity for teacher leadership in terms of four quadrants running along two continuums—skillfulness of teachers to act as leaders and levels of teacher leadership participation. Quadrant one schools have low skillfulness and low participation levels and are characterized by the following.
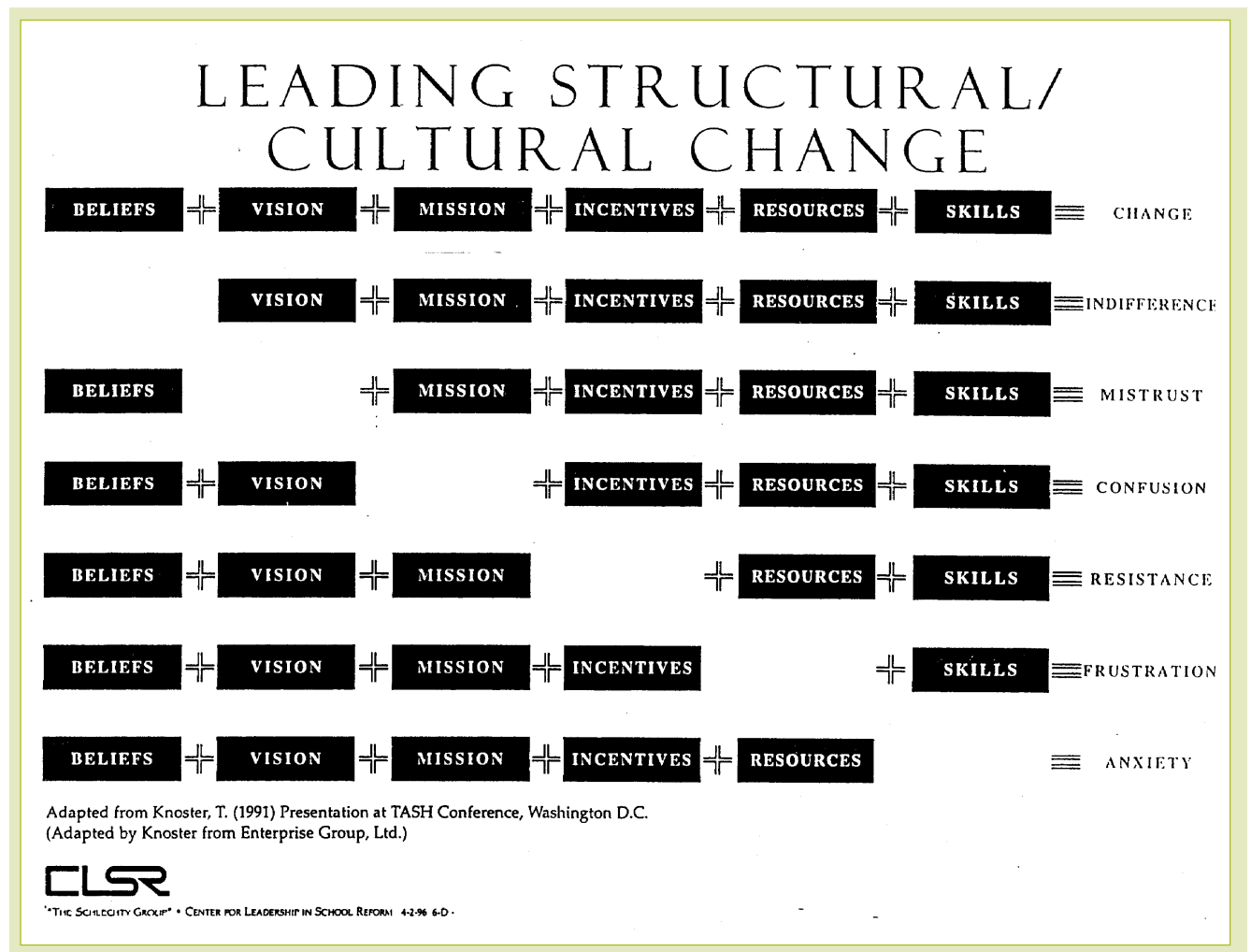
- Principal as autocratic manager

- One-way flow of information; no shared vision

- Codependent, paternal/maternal relationships; rigidly defined roles

- Norms of compliance and blame; technical and superficial program coherence

- Little innovation in teaching and learning

- Poor student achievement or only short-term improvements on standardized tests

Quadrant two schools, which have low skillfulness and higher participation, display the following characteristics.

- Principal as laissez-faire manager; many teachers develop unrelated programs

- Fragmented information that lacks coherence; programs that lack shared purpose

- Norms of individualism; no collective responsibility

Figure 2 Leading structural/cultural change schema

LEADING STRUCTURAL/ CULTURAL CHANGE

BELIEFS	VISION	MISSION	INCENTIVES	RESOURCES	SKILLS	CHANGE
VISION	MISSION	INCENTIVES	RESOURCES	SKILLS		INDIFFERENCE
BELIEFS		MISSION	INCENTIVES	RESOURCES	SKILLS	MISTRUST
BELIEFS	VISION		INCENTIVES	RESOURCES	SKILLS	CONFUSION
BELIEFS	VISION	MISSION		RESOURCES	SKILLS	RESISTANCE
BELIEFS	VISION	MISSION	INCENTIVES		SKILLS	FRUSTRATION
BELIEFS	VISION	MISSION	INCENTIVES	RESOURCES		ANXIETY

Adapted from Knoster, T. (1991) Presentation at TASH Conference, Washington D.C. (Adapted by Knoster from Enterprise Group, Ltd.)

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- Undefined roles and responsibilities
- Both excellent and poor classrooms
- "Spotty" innovation; some classrooms are excellent while others are poor
- Static overall student achievement (unless data are disaggregated)

Quadrant three schools have low leadership participation, but high skills. Schools in this quadrant may exhibit the following.

- Principal and key teachers as purposeful leadership team
- Limited uses of school-wide data, information flow within designated leadership groups
- Polarized staff with pockets of strong resistance
- Efficient designated leaders; others serve in traditional roles
- Strong innovation, reflection skills, and teaching excellence; weak program coherence
- Student achievement is static or shows slight improvement

Quadrant four schools have high levels of both skillfulness and participation in terms of teacher leadership. These schools are considered the target and may possess the following traits.

- Principals, teachers, parents, and students as skillful leaders
- Shared vision resulting in program coherence
- Inquiry-based use of information to inform decisions and practice
- Broad involvement, collaboration, and collective responsibility reflected in roles and actions
- Reflective practice that leads consistently to innovation
- High or steadily improving student achievement

The survey and interview questions were designed to elicit teacher input related to the quadrant descriptors and to allow teachers and administrators to place their schools within the matrix. Follow-up interviews examined the rationale for the placement, revealing barriers to increased skill and participation. Teacher leaders are disposed to work collegially toward change and improvement at the team level, school level, and beyond (Danielson, 2007). The researchers' own understandings

Well implemented team structures can provide opportunities for teacher leadership to develop in middle level schools. photo by Alan Geho

of their schools, relationships with participants, and commitment to change within their schools were all considered as teachers worked together in cohort groups to analyze their data. Finally, the teacher researchers devised action plans based on their specific schools' potential and concerns. These plans were shared with administrators and, in some cases, implemented.

What is the status of teacher leadership?

Data from the participating schools indicated the following placements of schools within Lambert's (2003) leadership capacity matrix: quadrant one 14%, quadrant two 18%, quadrant three 59%, and quadrant four 9%. Overwhelmingly, the data indicated that schools had a predominance of teachers who were highly skilled in leadership but had low participation of teachers in leadership roles and activities. Even though the schools had school improvement teams and multiple committees where teachers were often assigned "leadership" roles, these were not synonymous with the presence and cultivation of teacher leadership in the school. The defining characteristics of a school in quadrant

three—limited use of school wide data, polarized staff, pockets of excellence, and innovation with relatively static student achievement—were the norm in 26 schools. Only four schools in the study were reported to have a predominance of both teachers highly skilled in leadership and teacher participation in leadership roles. Data analysis revealed why more schools were not in quadrant four.

What are the barriers?

Time. Lack of time was consistently found to be a barrier to developing teacher leadership. Multiple demands kept the teachers in the study from committing the time necessary to act as leaders. These demands included individual and team planning, meeting the needs of the whole child, collaboration with parents and other professionals, completing paperwork and other administrative duties, committee involvement, and fulfilling new requirements for accountability and testing. Those who wanted to get more involved in leading change in their schools and districts felt they were not able to add yet another item to their already full plates, and they felt they did not have the time necessary to collaborate with and lead other teachers.

Formal leadership structures. At first glance, the teacher researchers viewed formal structures for

Schools with high leadership capacity use data to inform decisions and practices. photo by Alan Geho

participation on committees and school improvement teams as beneficial to cultivating teacher leadership. However, a closer look at the data revealed that teachers tended to view these leadership roles as perfunctory— more of a "rubber stamp" on decisions that had already been made. Further, teachers in the study reported that these "leadership" positions were often assigned to the same teachers over and over again. Those not included viewed this as cliquish, as if only individuals who agreed with the movement afoot were chosen. Teachers who found themselves on such committees reported they often felt saturated by too much involvement and, therefore, could not do the job well enough to make their participation worthwhile. They also reported collegial "jealousy" from those not selected (typically by the principal). At times, teachers were on these committees by default, when no one else wanted to do it. Even when change resulted from work on curriculum committees, parent councils, and teaching teams, participants reported they did not feel they were the ones setting the agenda. The vision and incentive to participate—two elements key to implementing change—were missing in these schools.

Communication and fragmentation of faculty. Ironically, middle school structures designed to promote connections and identity were reported as potential barriers to cultivating teacher leadership. The close-knit team identities and focus on grade levels as units of instruction often led to communication barriers and a sense of fragmentation of the faculty as a whole. Teachers spent so much time with their own teams or grade level colleagues that they often lost focus on the needs and concerns of the whole school. Regular school-wide communication was limited, creating feelings of disconnect among teams and grade levels. Respondents in some schools reported that principals' actions did little to address these communication issues within buildings. Sometimes teachers felt that by keeping them apart, it was easier for the principal to maintain building-level control and make decisions without negotiating and compromising across many leaders.

Principal leadership style. It may come as no surprise that principal leadership was either a clear asset to the development of teacher leadership or a powerful barrier. The issue most frequently reported as impacting the cultivation of teacher leadership was the principal's leadership style. The principal's primary role is to be an instructional leader who mobilizes the energy

and capacities of teachers by supporting them in their endeavors to increase student achievement and learning (Fullan, 2002). To sustain school improvement, teachers and administrators need to work and create meaning together. Principals who were reported as engaging in collaborative leadership were seen as better equipped to both understand and support the leadership of others in the school. Those who were more authoritative and those who were laissez-faire proved to be the most troublesome. In schools where the principal was authoritative and preferred to make decisions alone, teacher leadership was relegated to service on committees and other formal structures where teachers felt they were merely there to implement predetermined plans. A limited number of teachers may have been part of the decision-making circle. Those not in that circle felt that the principal

often lacked a mission as a way to actualize that vision. In these situations, teachers felt that change did not occur as a result of acting on their vision and beliefs. Change was seen as mandated or handed down from others. In schools with low leadership skills, teachers did not work toward developing the mission. These teachers no longer wanted to take part in leadership that led to no results or results that sometimes ran counter to their beliefs. When incentives were lacking, teachers felt that their time and energy were limited, and they needed to focus on direct contact with students. They felt there was little intrinsic pay-off for their work, and there was no other tangible compensation. Without the elements necessary to support change, teacher leadership cannot be fully supported and realized within the school.

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played favorites, thus causing division in the faculty. In schools where the principal was more hands-off with very little visual presence, teachers reported that there was confusion, lack of "buy-in," and occasional in-fighting among teachers trying to take charge of the situation. These situations undermine the collective efforts and ownership of a school with strong teacher leadership and the benefits derived from those leaders.

   Support for change. For real change to occur, teachers must become agents of change (Fullan, 1993). According to Knoster (1991), several elements must be in place and aligned to support and sustain change and improvement. In each of the school studies teacher researchers used Knoster's model. The model included six elements, namely shared beliefs, vision, mission, incentives, resources, and skills. They looked for evidence of these elements through the analysis of surveys, interview data, and artifacts found in the school, such as mission statements, school improvement plans, schedules, professional development plans, and faculty meeting minutes.

   The most frequently missing change elements across all types of schools in the study were mission and incentives, while vision, shared beliefs, and resources were the next most often reported missing. Even when schools had a vision grounded in shared beliefs, they

What action can we take?

Exemplary teachers who wish to remain in the classroom while leading school reform must find ways to take action. The teacher researchers developed action plans to address the primary barriers identified in each of their studies. Within each plan, they presented a timeline for implementation and identified key participants. They shared the plans with these participants, who often included building level administrators. Some plans were implemented immediately. Others led to dialogue, which called attention to the need for teacher leadership and to barriers that may have been present in the schools. The teacher researchers themselves acted as teacher leaders as they engaged in this action research. Overviews of some of the plans follow.

- *Making time: staff meetings, PLCs, teaming*
  Some action plans institutionalized time to develop teacher leaders within these middle schools. The plans included opportunities for teachers to meet and problem solve in staff meetings and to create professional learning communities (PLCs) as a way to empower teachers, set goals, and develop action plans. Plans also dedicated team time to give teachers a vehicle for voice and change. While staff

meetings, learning communities, and teams were all present and part of the time structure of the schools, they were not being used to cultivate teacher leadership.

- *Communication: A new approach to staff meetings*
  The research frequently revealed that staff meetings were an underused means for developing teacher leadership. In one action plan, teachers set up and led staff meetings with the principal's support, and in other plans, teachers used staff meetings as opportunities to share best practices and exchange ideas related to school improvement and changes in district policy. Teachers often felt traditional meetings were not very productive, so allowing them to take the lead in restructuring the purpose and function of staff meetings gave them a sense of renewal and collective ownership.

- *PLCs as teacher leadership*
  The term *professional learning community* (PLC) is frequently misused to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education (DuFour, 2004); however, true PLCs are collaborative cultures in which groups of teachers meet to lead change by focusing on student learning, making changes to improve their teaching practices, and evaluating the success of these changes. This allows PLCs to act as ideal situations for developing teacher leaders.

Many schools in the study were implementing PLCs (DuFour, 2007; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005), but these PLCs often operated with predetermined topics and agendas rather than being opportunities for teachers to engage in inquiry and implement changes related to

middle schools inadvertently foster competition and teacher isolation, especially across grade levels. Action plans included a specific focus on team time to regularly share and collaborate across teams and grade levels. Some schools planned to use "houses" in which students remain together across grade levels. This allows teachers in different grades to collaborate to meet students' needs over their entire middle grades experience.

- *Shared vision in action vs. the mission statement on the wall*
  Research participants often felt school mission statements were created for accreditation purposes, not for guiding and reflecting lived experiences of faculty and students. Many action plans revisited the schools' mission statements, aligning them with Knoster's (1991) change schema.

- *Recognition and sharing as incentives*
  Publicly sharing thoughts, practices, and accomplishments is an important way to recognize individual teachers as school leaders. Some action plans provided opportunities for such sharing at staff meetings, through bulletin boards, or by e-mail. This public recognition provided an incentive for teachers to take action in leading school improvement and change. Instead of spending money on speakers or consultants, the plans reallocated this money to teacher leaders who could facilitate professional development owned and determined by teachers. When monies for financial compensation were scarce, teachers were rewarded with small incentives donated by the school community, such as dinner certificates, spa coupons, or breakfast brought to the school.

> **Public recognition provided an incentive for teachers to take action in leading school improvement and change.**

issues they deemed important. Teachers may have been interested in the topics, but they did not fully own and engage in the process of developing the PLC in a way that could capitalize on widespread teacher leadership.

- *Rethinking structures: Crossing team and grade level boundaries*
  By emphasizing teams and team identity, some

Conclusion

As we face challenges to middle level education from many fronts, it is encouraging that we have so many exemplary teachers who can act as our guides to meaningful student-centered reform. To capitalize on the strengths and commitment of these educators, we

must find ways to tap into and support their leadership. Teachers, themselves, can act as researchers to help identify barriers and challenges to cultivating teacher leadership in their schools, and they can develop action plans to address these barriers as they build a community of learners and leaders within the school. In this manner, they can continue the hard work of the middle level movement—taking steps to move forward. Finding ways to empower teacher leaders to take these steps may be crucial to the retention of excellent teachers (Thornton, 2004). As excellent teachers enable young adolescents to achieve their greatest potential, it is a win-win situation for all involved. Strong principals who are willing and able to truly share leadership with their teachers will recognize this, but it is likely they already know.

Extensions

The author describes Lambert's framework for classifying leadership capacity in schools.

In which of Lambert's four quadrants of leadership capacity would your school be located? What data support your judgement?

What are some potential barriers to cultivating strong teacher leadership in your school? What actions can your school take to overcome these barriers?

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