

Teacher LEADERSHIP

Teacher leaders can be key to a school's success in achieving goals for students. Here are some ways principals can help teachers become instructional leaders.

As with most educational ideas, the concept of instructional leadership has evolved over time. In the 1980s it was principal centered, with images of heroic leaders single-handedly keeping the school on track. In the 1990s the paradigm shifted to effective principals working cooperatively with teachers to create learning communities to enhance teacher and student learning.

Today, instructional leadership is distributed across the school community to principals, superintendents and teachers. This new distribution is more than just a division of labor within the traditional hierarchy of leadership. Principals' and teachers' roles as instructional leaders are interdependent and frequently span the assumed boundaries of their titles.

Traditionally, the work of teachers has been centered on the classroom, helping children to learn. Although teachers who are instructional leaders still focus most of their energy on their classroom, these professionals are now being called upon to help improve their schools and even their school districts.

The recent educational reform movements, such as restructuring and site-based management, have promoted increased teacher participation and leadership in the decision-making processes of various aspects of school administration.

Today's instructional leadership

So what does instructional leadership look like today? The National Association of Elementary School Principals frames instructional leadership in terms of "leading learning communities." In its view, instructional leaders have six roles:

1. Making student and adult learning the priority.
2. Setting high expectations for performance.
3. Gearing content and instruction to standards.
4. Creating a culture of continuous learning for adults.
5. Using multiple sources of data to assess learning.

By Shelly Kurtz

6. Activating the community's support for school success.

Teresa Northern and Gerald Bailey (1991) have identified seven professional competencies that are apparent in instructional leaders. These competencies are the goals for effective principals and administrators and the characteristics of many teacher leaders. They include:

1. Visionary leadership – Having a clear vision of the future and a flexible plan for arriving at that vision.

2. Strategic planning – Being proactive by recognizing what is presently occurring and being able to anticipate changes and plan different courses of action.

3. Change agency – Understanding the stages of change and being aware of the leaders and blockers of change. People who are agents of change are able to implement change with minimal disruption.

4. Communication – Being a master communicator by communicating with clarity and meaning.

5. Role modeling – Modeling high expectations in all settings of the learning environment.

6. Nurturing – Fostering a positive school climate where teachers and students feel safe and connected.

7. Disturbing – Finding ways to disturb those who are comfortable with the status quo. Change is inevitable. Growth is a requirement. Complacency is the kiss of death.

Roles for teachers as instructional leaders

As instructional leadership has evolved, the roles for teachers as instructional leaders have also evolved. Traditionally, teacher leadership has been seen in roles such as department heads, textbook adoption committee chairpersons and union representatives. In addition to being restricted to these areas, opportunities for teachers were extremely limited. They served an efficiency function rather than a leadership function.

Today, in schools where there is little or no consensus around goals, teacher leaders are recognized by their efforts in non-instructional areas. They are noted as being strong administratively and are perhaps involved in the teachers' union, active in the

parent teacher organization, or involved in the state education association. They can also be characterized as "mothering" their colleagues by offering comfort and support. They often empathize with others' personal or professional problems. They are good listeners, sympathetic and kind, and they may often be outspoken.

These are all great qualities to have on staff but they are not really instructional leaders. In order for a teacher leader to be an

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instructional leader there must be collaboration and a shared vision. Since educational reforms have led to site-based management and collaborative school settings, teachers at these sites are now involved in the decision-making process and are becoming leaders of change. The success of site-based managed schools frequently depends upon the willingness of teachers to work with their colleagues in taking responsibility and directing activities of the school.

Current teacher leadership roles involve teachers as mentors, team leaders, department chairs, curriculum developers, staff development providers, grade-level chairs, and designers of new assessment processes, to name a few.

Teacher leaders in collaborative schools make effective instructional leaders and agents of change for several reasons. First, they have a vested interest. They care about what they do, how they do it and how it affects student learning. They also have a sense of history. They are aware of the norms of their colleagues and they remember the results of the trials and errors of previous times. They also know the community, and

understand its values and attitudes. And unlike administrators, teacher leaders can implement real change by returning to their classrooms and making it happen.

In collaborative school settings, strong teacher leaders who are instructional leaders share at least three common categories of action: they reveal to others new ways of doing things, they aspire for the best in themselves and in their colleagues, and they help others to solve problems.

Revealing new ways of doing things

Teachers who are instructional leaders are generally teachers who work very collaboratively with their colleagues. They make it a priority to find the time to meet, and they enjoy working with others. These instructional leaders reveal new ways of doing things by modeling new instructional strategies, freely sharing their knowledge and areas of expertise with others, initiating new programs, and making instructional decisions based on what is best for students.

Aspiring for the best in themselves and their colleagues

These teachers suggest and inspire ideas and discourse among the staff. They have positive attitudes and are willing to change. They have a positive regard for their colleagues; they respect, trust and support them. They are enthusiastic and highly professional, and these positive behaviors are often contagious. They draw others upward to higher places.

These teacher leaders earn respect from their students, parents and fellow staff members with their intelligence, dedication and work ethic. They are life-long learners and they are interested in furthering their education and learning. And perhaps most importantly, these teachers have a belief in their students and their ability to learn.

These are all wonderful characteristics, but to be a truly effective instructional leader, these need to be authentic. The actions of an instructional leader speak louder than words. People do not want to be manipulated by insincerity. Being able to motivate and bring out the best in people requires honesty and sincerity. Teachers need to be worthy of respect as a leader in order to earn the respect,

and without that respect they will not be effective leaders.

Helping others to problem solve

Teachers as instructional leaders help others to problem solve by identifying and recognizing problems that others tend to ignore. They attack problems and find ways to resolve them. These teachers are risk-takers and they thrive on new learning and divergent thinking to help problem solve.

Often, problems maintain a long lifespan simply because people are used to them. They assume that there is nothing that can be done, but there is always something that can be done. Teachers who are problem-solvers are experienced, knowledgeable and willing to help others.

Why teachers as instructional leaders?

Even the strongest instructionally cogent principal cannot stand alone. Teacher leaders are perceived as key to a school's success in achieving instructional goals for students. Effective school administrators recognize the importance of sharing the responsibility for developing vision, making decisions, and implementing programs.

When teachers participate in improving education, the changes are more likely to work. Without teacher buy-in, what is discussed in staff meetings and what takes place behind the classroom door may be two different things. Teacher leaders who instruct as well as inspire will have a powerful impact on educational reform.

How to become an instructional leader

Becoming an instructional leader is a two-way street for a teacher. A strong, professional relationship must exist between the principal and the teacher. There must be motivation and initiative on behalf of the teacher, as well as support and opportunity provided by the principal.

Teachers need to take ownership of their own careers and pilot their direction. Leadership is not handed out. It is largely up to teachers themselves to locate and exploit opportunities for the professional growth and development that will increase their qualifications and credibility for leadership.

Teachers who want to be instructional

leaders need to be active within their school and district, and they need to step up and volunteer. Part of the quest for knowledge and improvement must come from within. Teachers who want to become instructional leaders must stop waiting for someone else to make a change and they must move ahead on their own.

Often teachers do not have enough confidence in themselves as agents of change or leaders of instruction. This lack of confidence is fueled by the isolation that is inherent in teaching. In order for teachers to become instructional leaders they must get out of their own classrooms and get involved.

Teachers wanting to move into leadership positions must identify a change that is needed in their school district, school or classroom and then move ahead on their own. Teachers often become leaders after recognizing a need and committing themselves to taking action. The needs for change can vary greatly from community to community, from school to school, and from classroom to classroom.

The state, the district office, even the administrators do not have the first-hand knowledge that teachers do. Teachers need to be the ones to speak up about needed improvements. Instructional leaders do not wait until they are asked to become involved; they let people know they are interested and they take action.

In order for teachers to become instructional leaders they need support from their administrators and other teachers, as well as from outside the profession. Support to help more teachers become successful leaders can be given in many different ways.

1. Encourage teachers to lead and stay

1. Informed: Some teachers with great potential lack the confidence or skills to become successful leaders. Encouragement to make a presentation or head up a curriculum committee can help these teachers become leaders. They also need to be encouraged to acquire research-based information that can guide them.

Teachers' efforts to take on leadership roles outside the school need to be recognized and acknowledged as worthwhile, valuable and appreciated. Public recognition and ap-

plause encourages teachers to continue in outside leadership roles.

2. Create leadership roles for teachers:

2. More ways must be found to provide leadership roles for teachers that enable them to remain in the classroom. Not all outstanding teachers want to become principals, but traditionally there was no other position to rise to. Teacher leaders need the opportunity to work with adults, reflect on their practice and share it with others for development and critique. Teachers as instructional leaders need opportunities to share their knowledge and expertise.

3. Provide opportunity for teachers to continue learning and be trained as leaders:

3. Professional development is essential if teachers are to gain the knowledge and skills needed to be leaders.

4. Ease time constraints:

4. is often the greatest challenge for a teacher working to become an instructional leader. Time for leadership activities must be built into a teacher's schedule so that they don't need to carry a full class load and also squeeze in time to lead during their planning time or hours outside the classroom. A teacher leader's day and workload may need to be adjusted to allow for other involvements and to help avoid burnout.

5. Create more connection opportunities:

5. Teachers benefit from more talk time with each other and with the community. Most teachers have informal opportunities to talk in teachers' meetings or in hallways between classes. But more organized efforts to get together would help break down the professional isolation inherent in teaching, an isolation that can hamper the ability of teachers to build the knowledge and confidence needed to become leaders.

Opportunities to connect also help broaden teachers' perspectives and provide them with the context needed for being effective in their classrooms. Teachers as instructional leaders need opportunities to engage in collegial interactions with colleagues.

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Once a teacher has proven him or herself and becomes recognized as an instructional leader, a savvy administrator will eagerly welcome the opportunity to share some power and to capitalize on the strengths of the teacher leader. In order to maintain a positive working relationship between a

principal and teachers as instructional leaders, the administration must be very generous with support, praise, recognition and appreciation.

Teachers as instructional leaders should be offered support whenever possible, including monetary support. They should receive praise for their efforts and dedication, recognition for their accomplishments and appreciation for their contributions.

Teacher leadership is more important today than ever before because Americans expect more of schools and teachers. Today, Americans want all students to reach high levels of academic performance, a goal that calls for the participation of everyone involved in educating children, including teachers. Accomplishing this goal means that schools must change and that teachers must help change them.

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Mobilizing untapped teacher attributes

Teachers possess many leadership talents that, if put to use, can improve American education. Developing teachers' roles as instructional leaders is not about “teacher power.” Rather, it is about mobilizing the still largely untapped attributes of teachers to strengthen student performance and work toward real collaboration.

It is important to remember that the key to effective instructional leadership may well lie in principals' flexibility in sharing duties and their ingenuity at matching these duties with the appropriate teacher leaders. Although the buck for instructional leadership stops at the principal's doorstep, the efforts should truly be team-driven.

Indeed, if the principal were a facilitator of instruction rather than the “leader,” then it would be safe to assume that the true instructional leaders in the school could be the teachers themselves. ■

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