

An abstract, textured background in various shades of blue and teal. It features faint, overlapping silhouettes of several people, possibly in a classroom or meeting setting, rendered in a painterly style. The overall mood is professional and collaborative.

Teachers in the lead

A district's approach to shared leadership

A North Carolina district embraced teacher leadership, and the result has been overall achievement gains.

By David Stegall and Jayme Linton

As school buildings open for students each year, school leaders are charged with developing a sense of buy-in. Principals are expected to hold solutions to issues such as curriculum needs, closing achievement gaps, and building a sense of unity on campus. In traditional school structures, teachers identify problems and concerns, sending them to the school leader to solve. In turn, the principal often feels the urgency to send back a quick solution to the issues — in part to show his or her leadership. Unfortunately, this “problems up, solutions down” approach can further magnify the view of top-down leadership. When the principal owns the decision, teachers can be reluctant to support it, feeling that solutions are being done to them instead of with them. Too often, leaders become overwhelmed, feel secluded, and can feel the burden of coming up with solutions to every school problem.

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In the Newton-Conover City Schools in North Carolina, we believe regardless of whether a principal builds a structure of shared decision making and shared leadership, teachers will still have ideas and conversations about what they feel may be more effective. These conversations affect a school's entire culture. When teachers can take ownership of decision making and planning, decisions are often more productive and well-received. Such opportunities for empowerment have been shown to increase teachers' sense of efficacy. These decisions may be curriculum related, resource focused, or center around improving school processes. Creating a structure that empowers teachers builds buy-in, a sense of transparency, and collective efficacy. This belief in the power to reach school goals can carry over into the entire school culture.

For teachers to become effective leaders, administrators must create the appropriate environment. This includes providing opportunities for teachers to make appropriate instructional decisions for the school, processes for building trust and rapport, op-

In Newton-Conover, teachers are empowered beyond traditional meetings through school priority or "goal teams" and other opportunities for shared decision making. At the school level, school improvement teams identify school improvement goals through intense data analysis. Instead of handing over these problems to the principal, teachers divide into goal teams to develop solutions. These teams function as leadership teams in the school and are empowered to identify research-based strategies and best practices and to construct solution strategies into how the school does business.

Goal teams champion schoolwide decisions based on data. Goal teams are trusted with the resources and decision-making influence to focus on best practices, district initiatives, community needs, school processes, and what's best for students. If resources or training are needed, goal teams work with the principal to prioritize these needs in the school improvement plan. This defies the traditional top-down structure of decision making in schools where the school leader makes funding and training deci-

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portunities to collaborate with peers in order to build shared capacity, and occasions to make decisions regarding resource allocations and school processes.

"Strong leadership is the ability to empower those around you as well. We have teachers who have taken on leadership roles and strengthened the school who in another school setting may not have been utilized as a leader," said one central office administrator.

Creating conditions for leading

In North Carolina, schools and districts are expected to align their improvement work with five statewide strategic priorities. Savvy leaders who want to strengthen buy-in and empower teachers take a different approach to these issues. Shared decision making and leadership are much more than just a motto on their campuses. School-level teacher teams are empowered to put these strategies into practice throughout the school, create a monitoring system, and study the effect of improvement efforts before deciding if more changes are needed. School leaders become more of a resource to the teacher teams, helping them identify gaps and possible areas for improvement instead of defining the work that needs to be done. This "problems down, solutions up" approach empowers teachers and school stakeholders to make decisions and address possible solutions to problems instead of waiting on the leader to tell them what needs to be done.

sions. This approach allows teachers and other staff to own not only their classrooms but schoolwide issues as well.

One team may focus on student academic perfor-

Newton-Conover City Schools Newton, N.C.

Enrollment: 2,970 students

Number of schools: Three elementary, one middle school, two high schools, two special schools

Number of staff: 411, including 230 certified staff

Racial/ethnic mix:

White	53%
Hispanic	22%
Black	15%
Asian	5%
Multi-racial	6%

Free/reduced-price lunch: 63%

mance and growth as well as schoolwide academic needs. Teacher leaders on this goal team do such work as planning intervention and enrichment programs that are deliberate, timely, and appropriate for schoolwide use. They may also assume responsibility for choosing instructional resources to buy based on school needs. These teacher leaders advocate for the academic and instructional needs of all students in the school and share team decisions with the entire staff. The goal team evaluates the school's academic programs and resources to determine how to continually improve.

Teacher leaders on the goal team that focuses on teacher growth and development are charged with crafting and prioritizing staff professional expectations and professional development needs. They match the professional growth needs with school goals, not just individual interests. Meanwhile, a

Administrators have bought into and endorsed the concept of school improvement through teacher empowerment. School leaders have developed a trust and transparency with school stakeholders, providing teachers with the same data and information that school leaders traditionally have to make informed decisions.

Collaboration

Weekly collaborative team meetings increase teacher empowerment and build a sense of community. Conversations at those meetings must be focused on critical elements. As teachers come together with colleagues to share best practices, analyze student data, and plan, they break down the traditional barriers that exist in many public schools. Teachers are no longer isolated from peers; they become a community of professionals working toward

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separate team may focus on technology and other resource needs, as well as accountability systems for reporting operational results. Still other school staff will focus on parent and community stakeholder needs.

Like any improvement strategy, in order for this approach to be successful, the school leader must provide a vision and the structure, as well as monitor implementation to ensure the fidelity of the process. Goal teams foster shared decision making by the staff and empower teachers to own decisions that affect the schools. Teacher leaders identify school needs, brainstorm solutions, make decisions, and execute changes for continuous improvement. In short, they become empowered through the goal teams, which increases buy-in with new initiatives or changes that affect the entire staff. Through this process, teacher leaders become advocates and champions for their schools.

Rosenholtz (1989) said this type of learning-enriched school holds the key to sustained school improvements. Turning over decision making to teachers without creating a support system isn't the answer. Much has been written about the effect and importance of professional learning communities (PLCs). In Newton-Conover City Schools, PLCs are facilitated weekly by instructional coaches who work hand-in-hand with teachers providing the training, resources, and data identified as necessary to close achievement gaps. Instructional coaches have a proven record of being effective classroom teachers and have now assumed teacher leader roles.

The conversations that occur and the products that are created in collaborative team meetings spill over into hallways, classrooms, and the cafeteria. As people genuinely learn to hear each other, even when they disagree, they must learn to listen with openness. Colleagues come to depend on each other and appreciate the dialogue and ideas generated in those community meetings. This reconnection of community allows team members to focus less on complaining and more on what they're trying to accomplish.

"I am a more intentional, thoughtful teacher. The isolation I used to feel in my teaching practice is much less after one of our community meetings," said a prekindergarten teacher.

Throughout the process of becoming a PLC, teachers remain focused on building a productive, collaborative culture. The format of weekly team meetings should be flexible and allow for rich discussion. In Newton-Conover, the topics for our PLC meetings stem from student, teacher, school, district, and state needs. All participants of PLC teams are trusted and encouraged to take leadership of discussions and planning. Years of experience, hierarchy, tradition, and seniority give way to shared ownership of leadership, trust, areas of expertise, and inquiry. Knowledge gained from experience and specialized expertise is shared, dissected, and applied to appropriate areas of the school. Leaders can emerge from a novice teacher who has fresh ideas to share just as they do from the traditional ranks of the experienced veterans in the school.

PLC meetings sometimes take the shape of sharing sessions, with teachers bringing ideas, resources, and strategies to share with colleagues. “I really appreciate the support that is provided by my colleagues in PLC meetings each week. These meetings are very purposeful and help keep me ‘on my toes’ with new ideas and strategies that I can use in my classroom to help my students achieve success,” said one 2nd-grade teacher.

“We have the best team conversations that spill over into the classroom and help our students,” said a 3rd-grade teacher.

Teachers who have shown effective strategies for reaching at-risk students take a leadership role in helping their peers grow as well. Other meetings may include analyzing student data, setting goals based on that data, and adjusting instruction to meet student needs. When analyzing data in collaborative teams, the teachers are empowered to not only focus on identifying struggling students, but also to develop effective schoolwide strategies to help similar students succeed. Teacher leaders are a valuable resource in these discussions as they share their expertise, experience, and knowledge of best practices with peers. Student, teacher, school, and district data is transparent, owned by everyone, and used to guide and improve instruction throughout the school, not just in traditional pockets of excellence.

Another effective use of collaborative team meetings focused on empowering teachers is engaging teachers in peer observations, also known as instructional rounds. In rounds, teacher leaders open their doors and allow colleagues to make informal visits and observations of classroom practice. Peer observations and coaching can benefit both the individual being observed and the individual observing. Strong classroom teachers assume a leadership role by modeling effective instructional practices for peers. Teachers take the lead in sharing and discussing what they observed.

Teachers can also take on leadership roles through collaborative planning. The instructional coach, classroom teachers, and instructional support teachers pool their resources and ideas to construct lesson plans collaboratively. Grade-level teams prepare for collaborative planning by establishing a focus or topic for the team. All members involved in collaborative planning come prepared to ask questions, share effective strategies, and contribute to discussions. During collaborative planning meetings, teacher leaders engage colleagues in examining best practices and applying those practices to content standards. “PLCs are very helpful and insightful in informing us of ideas we may not have thought of before to meet our students’ needs,” said a kindergarten teacher.

Student outcomes of shared leadership

By building teacher leaders through collaboration, data transparency, an unrelenting focus on continual improvement, and shared decision making, Newton-Conover City Schools has made tremendous academic growth. In four years, Newton-Conover’s graduation rate increased from 67.3% in 2006 to 88.6% in 2010. Out of the 115 school districts in North Carolina, Newton-Conover had the third highest graduation rate in 2009-10, despite an extremely diverse and high-poverty student population.

The district’s 3rd- through 8th-grade students have made remarkable strides in achievement as measured by the reading and math end-of-grade (EOG) tests. During the same four-year period, math proficiency in 3rd through 8th grade increased from 63% in 2006 to 86% in 2010. In addition, EOG reading proficiency increased from 53% to 70% from 2007-08 to 2009-10. High school student achievement rose from 68.9% proficiency in 2006-07 to 85.5% in 2009-10. Having created a structure that supports teacher leaders, these results should prove to be sustainable beyond the tenure of a school principal.

“PLCs have taken the entire school building and molded us together as one. Our school building works as a collaborative force now. It is so nice to see our staff working together for the common good of all,” said one principal. **K**

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Reference

Rosenholtz, S. (1989). *Teacher's workplace: The social organization of schools*. New York, NY: Longman.



“I’m Ms. Hunt. You can access me by raising your hand.”

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