

A SERVE Special Report

Teachers of the Year Speak Out: Tapping into Teacher Leadership

2001

Introduction

Susan Bridges anxiously waits to hear who will become the new principal at her school. As a teacher in the forefront of school change and improvement, Susan has seen principals come and go with regularity during the 12 years she has taught in the school. Some of these building administrators were supportive of teacher leadership, while others were threatened by the suggestions made by the staff. What will the new principal bring to the school? Will Susan and her colleagues spend their time and energies bringing the principal up-to-speed in what they are doing to improve student learning? Perhaps this time the principal will be knowledgeable about how to collaborate with existing teacher leaders and build on their successes. Time will determine the outcomes of these questions, but meanwhile Susan and other staff members wait in anticipation.

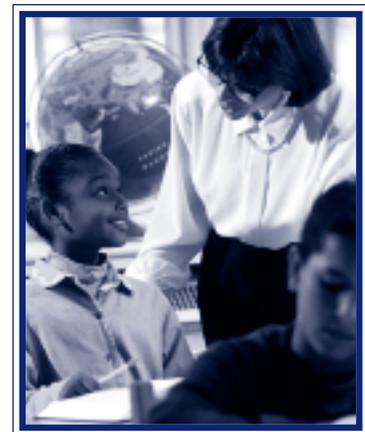
Susan's dilemma is not unique. Conversations with teachers in the forefront of school improvement across the Southeast reveal this situation repeats itself over and over again. One teacher reported that it took her colleagues over five years to help their principal understand how to support teachers. This teacher reported success, but how many similar stories end in disappointment? Teacher and administrator relationships are key to improving student learning in schools. Principals who recognize that teachers can assume leadership roles formerly reserved for administrators unleash a powerful resource for the school.

SERVE, recognizing the potential of teacher leadership, developed a mechanism through which teacher leaders'

voices could be heard to benefit educational improvement. Over a nine-year period, SERVE invited the current and past Teachers of the Year from Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina to meet on a bi-annual basis to explore issues related to teacher leadership. After studying current literature about teacher leadership, these exemplary teachers examined and compared their personal experiences with the research. The teachers acknowledged that "walls" often exist between teachers, administrators, and policymakers. Their hope is that the recommendations that emerged from their study together will promote positive relationships, leading to improved teaching and learning.

Why Promote Teacher Leadership?

Both teachers and administrators struggle to make schools better places of learning for students, yet the progress has been frustratingly slow. The pressure to improve the quality of teachers and instruction gained substantial momentum with the release of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) report, *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future*. According to this national imperative, "by 2006 we will provide every student in America with what should be his or her education birthright: access to competent, caring, and qualified teaching in schools organized for success" (NCTAF, 1996). This challenging goal can be addressed through systemic initiatives designed to build the capacity of teacher leadership.



After years of mandated programs and policies, we are finally recognizing that teachers, who are at the heart of the educational process, have the most expertise and knowledge of how to improve education for students (Louis, et al., 1996). In order to tap into that expertise, we must recognize and develop teacher leaders, as well as create structures to support them.

Teachers in collaboration with their peers can form a critical mass for positive or, unfortunately, negative change within a school. The concept of critical mass is defined in nuclear physics as the minimum mass of material needed to undergo a continuous chain reaction. Following the same line of thinking, a critical mass of teacher leaders can influence others throughout an educational organization.

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Written for SERVE by

Dr. Gayle Moller,
Western Carolina University

Dr. Deborah Childs-Bowen,
Consultant

Jennifer Scrivner, Consultant

Edited by

Dr. Charles Ahearn, Director
of Communications and
Publications, SERVE

Dr. Donna Nalley,
Project Director for
Publications, SERVE

Designed by

Jeremy McClellan,
Graphic Designer, SERVE

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Promoting teacher leadership is a relatively new practice in education. Historically, the culture of most schools is such that teachers behave as independent contractors working in isolation with minimal supervision. Unilateral directives set forth by policymakers fail to recognize that the improvement of education depends on the teacher's individual belief system of how and what students should be taught. These belief systems are rarely influenced by mandated policies, but they can be influenced through collective learning communities (Peterson, P. L. & Barnes, C., 1996).

The SERVE Teacher of the Year (TOY) Advisory Committee is an example of teacher leadership within a professional learning community. Through these teachers' personal leadership and their contributions to policy briefs and special reports, exemplary practitioner knowledge and research is accessible to all educational stakeholders. Here are some examples of testimonial statements from these teacher leaders:

The SERVE/TOY Advisory Group process empowers teachers to reflect...stretch...and grow into capable, caring leaders who make a difference in the lives of those who encourage teachers to lead.

It has been invaluable to interact with dedicated, passionate, innovative, student-centered teachers who have similar and yet varied experiences. We appreciate the opportunity to share, learn new ideas, support each other, and encourage continuation of our roles as teacher leaders.

Teacher leaders can collaborate with administrators in the effort to influence improved teaching and learning. The rich synergy of faculty and staff engaged in professional learning communities, both inside and outside the school, can contribute significantly to the school's success.

How Do I Know Teacher Leadership When I See It?

Amajority of teachers who take on leadership roles are reluctant to see themselves as leaders (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). To most teachers, a leader is defined as a formal position, such as principal, assistant principal, or department chairperson.

Teacher leaders hold formal roles, but most of the powerful work of teacher leaders is done informally and reflects a teacher's passionate interest in the focus of the leadership role.

In an effort to help teachers and other educators recognize the many facets of teacher leadership, the SERVE TOY Advisory Committee defined teacher leadership in October 1999:

Teachers are leaders when they function in learning communities to (1) impact student learning, (2) contribute to school improvement, (3) inspire excellence in professional practice, and (4) empower stakeholders to participate in educational improvement.

In order to fulfill their role as a teacher leader, they exhibit characteristics and skills such as the following:

- Maintaining a constant focus on student learning
- Seeking lifelong learning
- Skillfully using facilitation and presentation skills
- Developing and maintaining relationships
- Leading change
- Planning and organizing
- Understanding politics, power, and authority

Teacher leadership roles are uniquely dependent on the school context in which the teacher is working. Here are some examples of teacher leadership roles both inside and outside the school:

- Chair the state teacher forum to promote teacher leadership
- Work closely with legislators and policymakers
- Influence the Governor's Teacher Advisory group
- Serve as a lead teacher
- Provide professional development for other teachers
- Mentor new or experienced teachers
- Facilitate Teacher Dialogue Forums

What Would a School Look Like with a Critical Mass of Teacher Leaders?

If teachers could design a school in which teacher leadership was the norm, what would be happening in that school? This question offered the SERVE TOY Advisory Committee the opportunity to reflect about the ideal school.

School Culture

Creating a school culture supportive of teacher leadership within professional learning communities is more than a congenial work environment, as camaraderie does not necessarily result in professional growth. Attention to building a healthy school culture is a key element in promoting teacher leadership (Bishop, H. L., Tinley, A., & Berman, B. T., 1997).

Teachers want to work in school settings where they are valued and engaged in substantive collaborative work. Open communication, trust, and rapport within a culture that accepts conflict as inevitable represents the type of organization supportive of teacher leadership, which can result in a higher level of teacher retention (Shen, 1997).

Professional Development

Schools with strong teacher leadership focus curriculum and professional development on improved student learning (Hord, 1997). Time for interdisciplinary planning and grade-level cooperation allows continuous curriculum review and team teaching. Teachers feel successful when they collaborate to identify the best methods for improving student achievement.

The need to create results-driven, high-quality professional development in schools and systems is vital for teacher leadership. Leadership among teachers thrives when teachers are involved in planning and delivering professional development. Through study groups, mentoring new teachers, and professional conversations focused on student work, teachers create new ways to improve their practice. Professional development can be the leverage or focal point for building teacher quality through teacher leadership.

Decision Making

Shared decision making in schools should engage the whole teaching staff. Teacher leaders who collaborate with school administrators to make critical decisions can develop a sense of shared responsibility in the development of schoolwide reform efforts. Many schools create democratic governance structures to support teacher leadership teams. School leadership teams focusing on making data-driven decisions regarding instructional practice and providing recommendations on prospective new teachers are modeling democratic ideals for students (Lezotte, 1994). For example, in Georgia, The League of Professional Schools is an organization that assists schools in developing governance structures that support teacher leadership and improved student achievement.



Students

When students observe their teachers exhibiting leadership skills, they, too, believe they can be leaders. Building on the leadership of teachers, students likewise should be empowered as stakeholders in their own education.

What Do Teacher Leaders Need?

Successful strategies to promote teacher leadership exist. With resources and districtwide support, teachers can take advantage of multiple opportunities to hone their leadership skills.

Networking

Formal and informal networks of teacher leaders have proven to be highly effective in building teacher leadership (Lieberman, 2000). Teachers need access to information about teacher networks and encouragement to participate in these external support groups. For example, the National Writing Project (NWP), a teacher network, uses a “teachers teaching teachers” model that promotes leadership opportunities for teachers at local sites and the national level. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) provides a powerful national network of certified teachers who advocate for increased teacher expertise. Networks need not be as formal as the NWP and NBPTS; instead, networks can exist at the school and district levels through staff retreats for renewal and teacher-sponsored critical friends groups.

Leadership Development

It is essential that teachers be given the same opportunities as school administrators in developing leadership skills, such as communication, facilitation, and organizational change theory. If teachers are to be empowered with decision-making opportunities and engage in establishing schoolwide goals, it is crucial that they understand the big-picture issues surrounding school reform. Too often talented teachers are asked to move from the isolation of the classroom to work with adults without additional knowledge and skills that are essential for this type of collaboration. Also, access to information and research is essential for quality decision making by teacher leadership teams in order to make an impact on curriculum development and instructional practice.

Resources and Encouragement

Teachers need time to work as leaders—time away from students to engage in learning and leading with colleagues. Teacher expertise is vital to the entire school improvement process, and yet it has been overlooked time and again—partly because teachers are simply not released from direct supervision of students to participate.

Who Is Responsible for Promoting Teacher Leadership?

As teachers take on leadership roles, they run into problems that challenge even the most committed teacher. Examples of these obstacles include (1) the structure of the school day that limits time for leadership responsibilities, (2) the transition from an isolated classroom experience to being a facilitator of other adults, (3) the egalitarian culture of teaching, which is skeptical of teacher leadership, and (4) the challenge to be taken seriously by formal school leaders in the school. To overcome these obstacles, university teacher educators, principals, school districts, policymakers, and even teachers must assume collective responsibility for promoting teacher leadership at all levels.

- University preservice teacher education programs should provide potential teachers with the understanding of how teachers are leaders in school reform. Teacher leadership, as a strand, can be woven throughout the entire teacher development program with leadership skills embedded within existing courses. Also, all graduate students in education should study teacher leadership and develop skills to take their newly learned knowledge back into the context of their school.
- Successful principals should identify competent, credible, and approachable teachers, then build their leadership capacity by providing resources. Principals must give teachers access to information and research crucial to their decision making. Research supports that “a school must build its own teacher leaders if it is to stay afloat, assume internal responsibility for reform, and maintain momentum for self-renewal” (Lambert, 1998).
- School districts can promote teacher leadership by inviting teachers to participate in districtwide decision making. Principals can benefit from professional development in how to promote teacher leadership at the local school level. Additionally, districts can create opportunities for teachers to

lead at the district level by placing teachers on special assignment while being released from classroom duties.

- Policymakers must understand the changing roles of teachers and provide resources for planning time and quality professional development. Currently, the typical school district allocates less than one percent of the budget for professional development; in contrast, the private business sector invests three times that amount (Sparks & Hirsh, 2000).
- Teachers can be powerful influencers with policymakers when advocating on behalf of students and the teaching profession. To influence policy, teachers must help educate the community regarding the changing role of teachers, the need for reflective practice, and collegial planning. Teachers must be able to articulate to the public a rationale that satisfies the question, “What’s in it for me and my children?” Thus, the community can learn how teacher leaders can impact student achievement through their expertise and knowledge of quality instructional practice.

Conclusion

Tapping into teacher leadership is a critical step to improving teacher quality and ensuring that education reform efforts work. First, individual teachers need to become more aware of their capacity to be teacher leaders. Then, when teachers collaborate with administrators to break down the walls that exist between them, changes are more likely to become systemic resulting in improved student learning.

Teacher leaders can help guide colleagues to achieve higher standards of instruction and promote positive relationships between principals and teachers. Then perhaps the reliance on principal as the hero leader can give way to collective leadership. Without teacher leadership, the classroom door closes, and the status quo is maintained.

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